The New Criterion

May 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1

"Diversity," "cultural studies" & other mistakes *by Roger Kimball*, 4

"The Innocents Abroad" *by Mordecai Richler*, 10

Emerson's eccentric circle *by James W. Tuttleton*, 19

The poetry of Paul Celan *by John Simon*, 28

New poems *by William Jay Smith, Mark Jarman & David Gelernter*, 39

Theater: "Rent" subsidy *by Mark Steyn*, 42; **Art:** "Mark Chagall 1907–1917" at the Jewish Museum *by Mario Naves*, 48; **Music:** New performances of Schumann *by James F. Penrose*, 52; **The media:** Celebrity culture *by James Bowman*, 57; **Fiction chronicle:** Intellects & addicts *by Brooke Allen*, 63

Books: *Tomas Venclova* Aleksander Wat: life & art of an iconoclast *reviewed by Tess Lewis*, 68; *Alan Taylor* William Cooper's town *reviewed by Richard Brookhiser*, 71; *Richard Davenport-Hines* Auden *reviewed by Donald Lyons*, 74; *Jane Kenyon* Otherwise: new & selected poems *reviewed by Robert Richman*, 76

Volume 14, Number 9, $4.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stanley Boxer

70th Birthday Exhibition

Jedd Novatt

Sculpture

May 1 to June 1

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York 10021 Tel (212) 879-6606

Monday-Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DAVID HOCKNEY

Painting as Performance

May 7 - June 15

ANDRE EMMERICH

Fifth Floor at 41 East 57 Street New York 10022

Telephone 212 752-0124 Fax 371-7345

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IRVING PENN

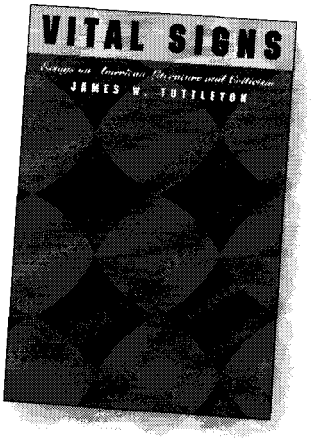
Fringes

April 11 - May 11, 1996

PACEWILDENSTEINMACGILL

32 East 57th Street, NYC / phone 212.759.7999 fax 212.759.8964

In his illuminating new collection of essays, James Tuttleton treats great literature as art, not social science



Vital Signs

Essays on American Literature and Criticism

BY JAMES W. TUTTLETON

One of our most trenchant critics scrutinizes a century and a half of great American writing. In nineteen essays his discussions of the masterworks are counterpointed with an analysis of the effect of contemporary critical theory on the American canon. Here is a distinctive voice in literary criticism.

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
Chicago 60622
At your bookseller, or order toll-free 1-800-634-0226 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *May 1996*

Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Editor *David Yezzi*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*
Editorial Intern *Scott Pitcock*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

Richard Brookhiser's most recent book, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*, was reviewed in our March 1996 issue.

David Gelernter is a professor of computer science at Yale University.

Mark Jarman is co-author, with Robert McDowell, of *The Reaper Essays*, to be published in July by Story Line Press.

Roger Kimball is the author of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (HarperPerennial).

Tess Lewis is a writer and a translator.

Donald Lyons is the theater critic of *The Wall Street Journal* and the author of *Independent Visions* (Ballantine).

Mario Naves is an artist based in New York.

James F. Penrose is a lawyer and a pianist.

Mordecai Richler's latest book is *This Year in Jerusalem* (Knopf).

Robert Richman is the editor of *The Direction of Poetry*, a collection of recent rhymed and metered verse (Houghton Mifflin).

John Simon reviews theater for *New York* magazine and films for *National Review*.

William Jay Smith has edited, with Leif Sjöberg, *The Giant Pine: Poems from Sweden*, forthcoming from New Rivers Press.

Mark Steyn is the film critic of the London *Spectator*.

James W. Tuttleton is a professor of English at New York University.

"*The Innocents Abroad* or the New Pilgrim's Progress" is the introduction to *The Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain, to be published by Oxford University Press in the fall of 1996 as part of *The Oxford Mark Twain*, a twenty-nine-volume set edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Copyright © 1996 by Mordecai Richler. Printed by permission of Oxford University Press.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. May 1996, Volume 14, Number 9. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1996 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 2020 Superior Street, Sandusky, OH 44870. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

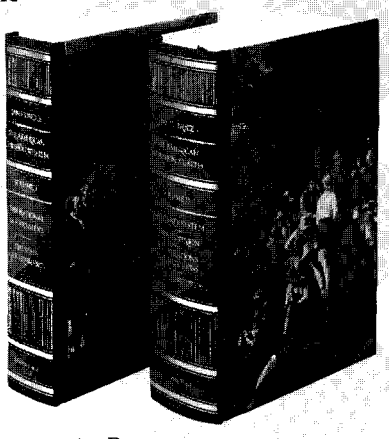
The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Modern Editions of Classic Works for Today's Readers

THE AMERICAN COMMONWEALTH

In Two Volumes
By James Bryce



In American studies there are two classics of the nineteenth century by foreign observers. In *Democracy in America* (1835) the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville interpreted American society through the lens of political theory. In 1888, the Scotsman James Bryce examined "the institutions and the people of America as they are." Interviews and even friendships with leading citizens, and travels throughout the land, enabled Bryce to produce "a grand atlas" of American society and political institutions. "Why Good Men Do Not Go Into Politics" and "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents" are typical discoveries that emerge from Bryce's cogent explanations of the actual operations of political parties and municipal and state governments. Bryce later served as England's ambassador to the United States from 1907-1913. The new Liberty Fund edition of his masterpiece includes contemporaneous (1889) reviews by Woodrow Wilson and Lord Acton.

1664 + xlvii pages

Hardcover	$35.00	0-86597-116-1
Paperback	$16.50	0-86597-117-x

"Conceived in Liberty"

For a nation "conceived in liberty," the study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals is a never-ending obligation. To encourage this deliberation, Liberty Fund makes available a wide range of outstanding books that explore the genesis of liberty in individual life, in society, governance, and economics. Our publications include the works of Adam Smith, David Hume, Lord Acton, Ludwig von Mises, Nobel laureates F. A. Hayek and James Buchanan, crucial political writings of the American founding era, and landmark works in education, philosophy, and law. We invite you to request a free copy of our catalogue.

Call 800-955-8335
Fax 317-579-6060
or write:

Liberty Fund INC.

We pay book rate postage on prepaid orders.

8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300, Dept. Z606, Indianapolis, IN 46250

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: May 1996

"Redbaiting" reconsidered

What a difference a year makes! A year ago, on the occasion of the publication of *The Secret World of American Communism* in Yale University Press's "Annals of Communism" series, we raised the question of "whether, in today's intellectual climate, [the] disclosures contained in *The Secret World of American Communism* will prove to be sufficient to reverse 'the dominant perspective among academic historians for the past twenty years' on the subject of the Communist movement in America. . . . For this 'dominant perspective' has been based more on ideology than on an interest in knowing the truth." (See "Revising the Revisionists on American Communism," in Notes & Comments for May 1995.)

Yet a year later, while an entrenched anti-anti-Communist perspective no doubt remains dominant in the nation's classrooms, elsewhere there have been some remarkable shifts of opinion—particularly on, of all places, the American political Left. One stunning example was a column by Garry Wills, who, some twenty years ago, eagerly played the dupe in defending Lillian Hellman's Stalinist lies in *Scoundrel Time*. In his column for March 19 in the *New York Post*, however, Wills warned his comrades on the political Left that it was time to abandon the pretense that Alger Hiss was innocent of the charge of spying for the Kremlin. Or, as the subhead in the *New York Post* put it: "It's time for the Left to admit that Richard Nixon was right."

Then, on April 14, came a blockbuster of an article in *The Washington Post* that asked the question that had been forbidden on the Left for nearly half a century: "Was McCarthy Right About the Left?" The author was yet another disabused liberal, Nicholas von Hoffman, and he addressed the anti-anti-Communist issue with the kind of candor, bluntness, and passion that recalled, amazingly, the eloquence of the late Sidney Hook in the days of his pitched battles with the political Left on precisely this issue. Mr. von Hoffman is worth quoting at length, for his article was clearly intended to spark a historic revision of the anti-anti-Communist revisionists. Its tone was set in its opening paragraph:

> The American Left has an unexamined past. Like the French conservatives, who went into deep denial about their collaboration with the Nazis a half century ago, American leftists and some of their liberal allies have refused to sort out their own intimate connections with Marxist-Leninism in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

Quoting, with approval, from Whittaker Chambers's *Witness*, Mr. von Hoffman observed that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> For decades after Chambers wrote [*Witness*], liberals and leftists held the high ground in the dispute over whether a Communist conspiracy actually existed in the United States or was simply a by-product of "the paranoid style in American politics."

And further:

> In the upmarket universities and other places where the dominant form of polite liberalism thrived, the accusers, who had named names and had pointed out the Communist spies, were scorned as despicable vermin. Among the mainstream scholars, like Richard Hofstadter, the forces of domestic anti-Communism were described largely as manifestations of social underdevelopment and popular irrationality, not legitimate concern.

"Was McCarthy Right About the Left?" exaggerates nothing while recalling a period of unacknowledged political shame.

> As the 1960s wore on, the savagery and futility of the Vietnam War discredited the anti-Communist cause. By the end of the 1960s, the demonization of anti-Communism had gained currency, and not just on the far Left.

Yet, as a result of the opening of the Soviet archives and the more recent release of the National Security Agency's Venona transcripts from the 1940s, the anti-anti-Communist cause has indeed been exposed to be as much an example of "deep denial" as the French denial of collaboration with the Nazis. As Mr. von Hoffman further observed:

> The Age of McCarthyism, it turns out, was not the simple witch hunt of the innocent by the malevolent as two generations of high school and college students have been taught.

There was more to Mr. von Hoffman's article than can be adequately summarized here, including his reflections on the damage that McCarthy inflicted on the anti-Communist cause as the result of irresponsible charges against people who were not, in fact, Communists at all. Mr. von Hoffman's conclusion nonetheless remains historically important as a statement of liberal guilt on the anti-anti-Communist issue.

> Enough new information has come to light about the Communists in the U.S. government that we may now say that point by point Joe McCarthy got it all wrong and yet was still closer to the truth than those who ridiculed him.

In his column for the *New York Post*, Gary Wills said that he was prompted to write about Hiss by a curious omission in the long obituary that *The New York Times* ran for the art historian Meyer Schapiro in March. Although the obituary was of a length and fulsomeness that the *Times* usually reserves for important world leaders. ("One would think," Mr. Wills quoted a friend as saying, "that the Pope had died.") But despite the length and detail of the obituary, the *Times* somehow failed to mention that Schapiro, despite his own left-wing commitments, had come to support Whittaker Chambers against Hiss. This is how it happened: Chambers had been told by his Communist bosses to reward four agents with an expensive gift. He decided on Oriental rugs and asked his friend Meyer Schapiro to help him pick out four Bokhara rugs. As Mr. Wills explained,

> Hiss admitted getting a rug from Chambers, but said it had been given to him before the end of 1935—an important date because all of Hiss' spying activities took place after 1935. . . .
>
> The problem with Hiss' story is the rugs were purchased in 1937—a fact established by records of purchase as well as by Schapiro's memory.

Since Hiss still had the rug when he was tried, it would have been a simple matter to ask Schapiro to testify and ask him whether

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the rug in question was the one he had picked out for Chambers to give to Hiss. Had Hiss been telling the truth, Schapiro's testimony would have totally discredited Chambers's charges. Yet Hiss refused to have Schapiro called. Why? He said that the prosecution would have hidden the truth. But for Mr. Wills, the story of the rug was "one of many things that convinced me that Hiss was lying." What Mr. Wills calls "the myth of Hiss' innocence" has indeed been a perennial dogma on the Left. Which is one reason that Mr. Wills, despite his long association with the Left, concluded that "not even Nixon was infallibly wrong" when it came to naming Communists. This, by the way, is something that *The New York Times* has yet to acknowledge—and it will be a while, too, before the Soviet penetration of the American government from the 1930s onward for several decades will be widely taught as an important chapter of our history in American classrooms. But the times, if not yet *The New York Times*, appear to be changing in regard to the myth of Communist innocence in the Stalinist era.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Diversity," "cultural studies" & other mistakes

by Roger Kimball

In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of—ethnic studies? Not exactly the trochees that Tennyson would have chosen, perhaps, but such are the vicissitudes of academic life today. In what has become nearly as predictable—if not as welcome—as the appearance of daffodils, disgruntled students at Columbia University once again took advantage of the first sign of clement weather to act like spoiled children and "demonstrate" against the university. It was all a far cry from the violent events of 1968. Still, in early April about two hundred students took part in various protest activities, including rallies, hunger strikes, and the brief occupation of Columbia's Low Library. This year, the "issue" was establishing an "ethnic studies" department. According to a manifesto published in a Columbia student newspaper, such a department would seek to create "post-disciplinary scholarship which counters white hegemony, not only in content but in form and epistemology," overturning "the Eurocentric—and invariably racist—intellectual foundations of traditional disciplines." You know, disciplines like English, history, classics, mathematics, philosophy: all that white, hegemonic stuff. The irony, of course, is that many of the students who agitate against the "Eurocentric" curriculum at Columbia and elsewhere are only present at the university in the first place because of the discriminatory practice of what is euphemistically called "affirmative action," a.k.a. preferential treatment. But once admitted, it turns out that what many such students want is not an education but ideological training designed to confirm their coveted status as "victims."

While the Columbia University administrators did not cave in entirely to these student demands, they did agree to hire more minority faculty and give students a role in their selection. All this was done in the name of fostering . . . "diversity." Indeed, "diversity" has emerged as an epithet of talismanic power in our society. It has mesmerized not only American colleges and universities but also many businesses that, struggling to keep up with Federally mandated "affirmative action" quotas, have hired "diversity consultants" to improve their "diversity profile," i.e., the number of specified minorities, women, handicapped persons, etc., that they employ. As the social commentator Heather Mac Donald reported in an essay on "The Diversity Industry" in *The New Republic* a couple of years ago, what counts for those charged with increasing diversity in the corporate world is not competence but such political criteria as race, sex, or ethnic origin. As one "diversity consultant" bluntly admitted, "'Qualifications' is a code word in the business world with very negative connotations."

It has pretty negative connotations in the academic world, too, especially in admissions offices. In a short but brilliant article

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in *The Weekly Standard* ("Harvard Loves Diversity," March 25), the political philosopher Harvey Mansfield used a report recently issued by Harvard's president, Neil Rudenstine, on the subject of "Diversity and Learning" to make some much needed distinctions. "In the past," Professor Mansfield noted, "diversity was sought for the sake of academic excellence; now it is sought at the expense of excellence." The handmaiden of "affirmative action" policies, diversity as pursued in the academy no longer refers to intellectual diversity but to the effort to achieve proportional representation on the basis of race, ethnic origin, and other considerations that have nothing to do with a student's academic qualifications or achievement. According to President Rudenstine, although it is important to maintain high academic standards, "the more difficult and genuine challenge" for Harvard is to achieve "diversity." But, as Professor Mansfield pointed out, this just is not true: "It is easy to indulge 'other significant values' than excellence. . . . What is hard is to sustain excellence against the temptation of other values that appear to be more significant." Now that total fees at some of our premier universities exceed $30,000 per year, it is worth stepping back once again to ask just what the mania for diversity has wrought: to ask just what students are getting in exchange for their tuition dollars at a time when colleges and universities are everywhere willing to compromise educational standards for the sake of meeting political quotas.

One thing that almost all colleges and universities these days are trumpeting is a species of extreme relativism that goes under the name of cultural studies. The adjective "cultural" makes it sound harmless enough; but in fact cultural studies encompasses activities and doctrines that are far from harmless. Despite its name, cultural studies is fundamentally an *attack* on everything that was traditionally meant by culture. Its primary motive is not knowledge but politics, specifically the radical, anti-Western cultural politics that is fired by feminism, multiculturalism, Afrocentrism, deconstruction, post-colonial theory, queer theory, and all the other unlovely allotropes of post-Marxist leftism that deface American colleges and universities like so much intellectual litter. The story of the rise of cultural studies—and make no mistake, it is on the rise everywhere in the academy—is a sorry tale composed partly of misguided political activism, partly of arrogant intellectual chicanery, and partly of pusillanimity among those who know better but are afraid to speak up. As usual, the biggest losers are students, who instead of receiving an education are treated to an expensive and corrupting form of ideological indoctrination. In the end, cultural studies is an intellectual coefficient of the spurious demands for "affirmative action" and diversity.

Readers of *The New Criterion* will be familiar with the radical agenda at the heart of cultural studies. Over the years, we have had occasion to report on numerous manifestations of this politically charged intellectual virus, which at many institutions has transformed the teaching of the humanities into a kind of intellectual freak show. These are harsh words; but they are not, alas, an exaggeration. As a specimen case, consider the Spring/Summer 1996 issue of the left-wing quarterly *Social Text*. Largely the brainchild of Stanley Aronowitz, a professional Marxist who teaches sociology and (of course) cultural studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, *Social Text* is a bit of an atavism among trendy *gauchiste* academic publications. In tone, anyway, it tends to display a dour, old-fashioned struggle-of-the-masses variety of Marxism. Instead of listing an editor on its masthead, for example, it brandishes an "Editorial Collective." That sort of thing. No doubt it makes Professor Aronowitz feel that he is doing his mite for the Revolution.

Still, he is learning. *Social Text* is now published by Duke University Press, one of the trendiest of academic publishers. And its current special issue is devoted to one of the trendiest of academic topics—the so-called

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Science Wars," i.e., the war *against* science and its canons of rationality that is now being waged by deconstructionists, post-structuralists, feminists, multiculturalists, and other partisans of diversity and cultural studies. Appropriately, the editor of this special issue of *Social Text* is Andrew Ross. Readers of *The New Criterion* will remember Professor Ross. He appeared, for example, in our report on the 1994 meeting of the Modern Language Association, where he participated in a panel called "Who Qualifies to Critique Science?"[1] A Scot by birth, Professor Ross has parlayed an accent (proletarian chic), adolescent attire and intellectual interests, and large dollops of Marxist rhetoric into an amazingly successful academic career. He first made a name for himself teaching English at Princeton University, where his proclaimed goal was radicalizing "the children of the ruling class." A few years ago, he was enticed away from Princeton to New York University to become director of its American Studies Program.

Professor Ross, who recently announced that he had given up on books for television and pop culture, was the perfect choice to edit this chrestomathy of animus against science and rationality. His own book on the subject, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*, was dedicated to "all of the science teachers I never had. It could only have been written without them." And he has assembled a roster of contributors who are, for the most part, just as militantly ignorant of science as he. Notable among the sixteen contributors to this volume is Joel Kovel, the Alger Hiss Professor of Social Studies at Bard College. (No, this is not a joke: someone actually paid to establish a chair at Bard to honor this convicted felon.) True to the spirit of his patron, Professor Kovel assures us that "Marxism, though very much in shambles, is given new life by the relevance of its critique of a capitalism gone berserk." Then there is one Hilary Rose, whose contributor's note informs us that she has been active "initially as a socialist and later as a socialist feminist, in the politics of science since the radical science movement came into existence as part of the opposition to the Vietnam War." And we mustn't forget Ruth Hubbard, whose essay "Gender and Genitals: Constructs of Sex and Gender" brings the memorable news that "when it comes to sex, the Western assumption that there are only two sexes probably derives from our culture's close coupling between sex and procreation. That coupling, if it does not grow out of the teachings of Western religions, is surely reinforced by them." Well, yes. I suppose it is. "Male and female created he them," and all that. But this duality—this (horror!) "binary opposition"—strikes poor Professor Hubbard as an intolerable impudence. So she scours the historical record for some unfortunate freaks of nature—enthusiasts for cultural studies are very high on hermaphrodites—and offers them up as evidence of human sexual polymorphousness. "The time is ripe," she concludes, "for physicians and scientists also to remove their binary spectacles and, rather than explore what it means to be 'male' or 'female,' look into what it means to be neither or both, which is what most of us are." Really? In his introduction, Andrew Ross bemoaned the "asinine anecdotes about feminist algebra, queer quantum physics, and Afrocentric molecular biology" that critics of science studies have been pleased to cite in their criticisms. But what about the asinine examples that he has gathered together to "demystify" the practice of science?

The bête noir for almost all the contributors to this issue of *Social Text* is Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt's book *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. Indeed, ever since it appeared, in 1994, this magisterial attack on the mind-boggling ignorance, arrogant pretentiousness, and political posturing that

1 See "A Farewell to the MLA," by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball, in *The New Criterion* (February 1995).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have characterized the radical "critique" of science has been high on the list of the academic Left's most hated books.[2] Andrew Ross sets the tone when he notes in his introduction that *Higher Superstition* "belongs fair and square to the tradition of Alan [*sic*] Bloom, William Bennett, Roger Kimball, Hilton Kramer, and Dinesh D'Souza"—than which, of course, nothing worse can be imagined. Other contributors decry "the hysteria of Gross and Levitt," their "unintelligent critique of science studies," their "malicious" spirit, "philosophical naïveté," etc. An amusing collection of charges, that, especially considering, on the one hand, the combination of venom and ignorance displayed by the contributors to this volume (and by practitioners of science studies generally) and, on the other, the intellectual sophistication and sprightliness with which Messrs. Gross and Levitt deployed their own criticism.

One reads that this issue of *Social Text* was intended to supply a "concerted" response to *Higher Superstition*. But although most of the articles begin with a ritual denunciation of the book, what Professor Ross has assembled is not so much a *response* to the attack on science studies as yet another compendium of the intellectual evils that Messrs. Gross and Levitt dissected with such consummate patience and skill in their book. There is, first of all, a general weakness for portentous pseudo-philosophical verbiage and name-dropping. Stanley Aronowitz provides a sterling example of this in his long essay, "The Politics of the Science Wars":

> My argument is not only grounded in the persuasive positivism of all academic disciplines but depends on one of the more important interpretations of quantum theory suggested by physicists and philosophers as diverse as Neils [*sic*] Bohr, David Bohm, and Roy Bhaskar. In opposition to interpretations of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, according to which the problem of measurement of the electron is chiefly epistemological, that is, following Kant's famous doctrine that knowledge of the real is inevitably mediated by the categories of the mind, Bohm, for example, offers an *ontological* interpretation of quantum theory.

And so on. Professor Aronowitz depends so extensively on Niels Bohr that he cannot even spell his name correctly. He also neatly illustrates my rule of thumb that anyone in the humanities or social sciences who invokes Heisenberg's uncertainty principle should be considered guilty until proven innocent. (The same goes for those invoking Thomas Kuhn's phrase "paradigm shift": what a lot of fog that little notion has conjured!) It has been clear for some time that trendy professors of English oughtn't to read philosophy: it gives them gas and confuses them. As Professor Aronowitz shows, this is equally true of trendy sociologists and professors of cultural studies. Kant is bad for them. If they insist on citing him, they ought first to be made to explain why Kant was right to define truth as "the correspondence of thought with its object." All and all, Professor Aronowitz confirms the observation made by the classicist Hugh Lloyd-Jones that *Geistesgeschichte* is really only a polite term for *Quatsch*—a polite term, that is, for twaddle.

But ignorant pretentiousness is the least of the evils afflicting cultural studies. There are two other intellectual debilities that are particularly in evidence in this issue of *Social Text* and that deserve notice. The first is the inability or unwillingness to distinguish effectively between language that is figurative and language that is predominantly discursive. Consider Sharon Traweek, associate professor of history and director of the Center for Cultural Studies of Science, Technology, and Medicine at UCLA. In her contribution, "Unity, Dyads, Triads, Quads, and Complexity: Cultural Choreographies of Science," Professor Traweek begins by recalling that the announced purpose of the

2 See my review of *Higher Superstition* in *The New Criterion* (May 1994).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

issue was to "coordinate views about the current state of the contests between social rationality and scientific rationality." The term *coordinate* sparks an intoxicated orgy of free-association. "The word," Professor Traweek writes, "brings to my mind Descartes's orthogonal measuring lines and the social niceties in the late 1950s of getting the colors of one's clothes aligned or even getting the lines of our high school drill team perfectly straight." In other words, Professor Traweek suffers from essentially the same deficiency as the children's book character Amelia Bedelia who, told to dress the turkey, proceeds to find some clothes into which she can stuff the unfortunate bird. It is worth keeping this in mind when, at the end of "Unity, Dyads," etc., we read that "the law of the excluded middle isn't always interesting and it doesn't always hold, especially in the best compositions. Let's dance."

The second intellectual handicap on prominent view in this issue of *Social Text* is the inability to distinguish between the uses to which science might be put and the truth or cogency of the knowledge which it supplies. Thus Andrew Ross writes that "if there has been one constant in the history of science, it is the relationship of applied research and technology to military force. Nothing belies the myth of pure science more than the evidence that it has served as the handmaiden of warfare." But of course Professor Ross has it exactly wrong. The fact that wave theory might prove to be useful in implementing the guidance systems of cruise missiles in no way compromises the purity or truth of the relevant mathematics. (And one feels constrained to remind Professor Ross that his cozy post at NYU is secure only because the United States has been lucky and prudent enough to put science to effective military use.) Another contributor, Sarah Franklin, inadvertently touches on the key issue when she criticizes, with italics, Messrs. Gross and Levitt's view of science "*because it is ultimately one that positions knowers as less powerful than the reality they describe.*" Indeed. This is the fundamental choice: either knowledge must defer to reality or, as the epistemological relativists would have it, reality must defer to the knower. Science—no, more: genuine knowledge of any kind—requires the former; cultural studies and its academic cousins embrace the latter.

All the contributions to this volume of *Social Text* are bad; but without doubt the most egregious effort is the concluding essay, "Transgressing Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" by the physicist Alan D. Sokal. In its way, Professor Sokal's essay is a model performance. Some fifteen pages long, it is followed by thirteen pages of pseudo-scholarly notes and ten pages of references. Although slightly more deferential than the other contributions to this issue—Professor Sokal refers early, fulsomely, and often to work by Stanley Aronowitz, Andrew Ross, and other luminaries of cultural studies—in tone and content his essay is utterly of a piece with the others, from its rebarbative title to its goal of outlining a "liberatory postmodern science." Along the way, Professor Sokal dispenses all the usual subjectivist clichés, arguing, for example, that "it has . . . become increasingly apparent that physical 'reality,' no less than social 'reality,' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct" and that "scientific 'knowledge,' far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it." The scare quotes around "reality" and "knowledge" are a nice touch. And the way Professor Sokal links the theories of Jacques Lacan and differential topology will be the envy of many a student of Cultural Studies: "In mathematical terms, Lacan is here pointing out that the first homology group of the sphere is trivial, while those of the other surfaces are profound; and this homology is linked with the connectedness or disconnectedness of the surface after one or more cuts," etc. Pure drivel, of course, but how expertly phrased! There is a great deal more that might be said about Professor Sokal's offering; anyone wanting a compact il-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lustration of what's wrong with science studies will want to savor it.

There is a lot of whining about "alternative rationalities" and the like in this issue of *Social Text*. Andrew Ross, for example, writes that "science does not have a monopoly on rationality," and he looks forward to contriving "different ways of doing science, ways that downgrade methodology, experiment, and manufacturing in favor of local environments, cultural values, and principles of social justice. This is the way that leads from relativism to diversity." For the most part, all this is a degraded form of politicized romance: a kind of academic New Ageism, in which political correctness unites with the poisonous dogmas of deconstruction to produce a notably fatuous form of nihilistic posturing.

And yet there is a sense in which it must be admitted that Professor Ross and his like-minded colleagues are straining to articulate an important insight. For although the notion that the truths of science are mere social constructions—that they are, for example, somehow subject to the claims of "diversity"—is arrant nonsense, it is nonetheless true that science by no means exhausts our experience of the world. The realities of love, of aesthetic or religious experience, the call of duty or conscience: these most exigent claims on our attention are not matters that can be reduced to scientific data. Then, too, the enormous power that science has given us over the natural world is a double-edged blessing. That power is real—which means that it continuously belies the efforts, so abundantly represented in this issue of *Social Text*, to read science as just another form of "discourse." But it also confronts us with manifold questions—moral questions—that science itself cannot answer. The real problem with science studies, quite apart from its juvenile politics and insufferable posturing, is not that it wishes to criticize the place of science and technology in our culture, but that it does not sufficiently acknowledge the truth and power of scientific rationality. By attempting to rob science of its special epistemological force—by denying, that is to say, the ideal of objectivity that stands behind and guides modern scientific inquiry—science studies assures that its criticism will be precisely the kind of fictional construct it accuses science itself of being. One may well wish to criticize the "hegemony" of scientific rationality in our culture; but one can do that effectively only by first facing up to the reasons for that dominance and acknowledging the extraordinary explanatory power that science affords us. The philosopher Karsten Harries seems to me correct when he observes that

> the pursuit of objective reality . . . has liberated our understanding . . . and granted us a more adequate understanding of the workings of nature. Technology demonstrates daily the power that the pursuit of objectivity has granted us. And if we see with ever clearer eyes the frightening dimensions of such power, we abdicate our responsibility of meeting that threat when we seek refuge in a rhetoric that suggests that our science is not really superior to all science that has gone before it or that out technological way of life is just another.
>
> But we abdicate our responsibility also when we view technology as an autonomous force, a dictator who will dispose of our lives, regardless of our wishes.

The key, Harries suggests, is to recognize that "the task facing us is not simply that of guiding technological progress, but the much more difficult task of establishing boundaries of that progress." Exactly where one will discover criteria for establishing those boundaries is not perhaps clear. Certainly, a recognition that many human problems are not, and should not be, susceptible to technological manipulation and management is a necessary first step. But it is just as certain that the naïve political fantasies fostered by cultural studies, which begin by denying the truth and power that science offers, succeed primarily in exhibiting their own impotent frivolity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The Innocents Abroad" or the new pilgrim's progress

by Mordecai Richler

The business of getting from here to there has become increasingly frustrating, even infuriating, and I speak as someone who once adored traveling, the slaphappy sensation of traipsing down the twisting streets of a foreign city for the first time, your jaded senses heightened by what Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrated as "all things counter, original, spare, strange."

Of course nowadays disembark in Moscow, Barcelona, or Tel Aviv, set out for the main boulevard, and you are bound to be deflated by the familiar: a McDonald's, a Georgio Armani boutique, a Gucci, a pizza bar, and a shop called "Wyatt Urp" or "Doge City" [*sic*] specializing in designer jeans and hand-tooled western boots made by prisoners in China. Overpriced restaurants will welcome American Express, Visa, and MasterCard. CNN will be available on your hotel TV, and you can count on the indigenous channel to be showing reruns of "Dallas" or "Cheers," dubbed in Russian, Spanish, or Hebrew. Mind you, these latter variations on the familiar can be inadvertently amusing.

Item: in 1951, drifting down the Ramblas in Barcelona, somewhat footsore, I slipped into a cinema to catch a Joel McCrae western dubbed in Spanish and, lo and behold, good old reliable Joel moseyed up to a saloon bar in Tombstone and demanded, "*Uno cognac, por favor.*"

I first crossed the Atlantic, at the age of nineteen, in 1950, on board the *Franconia*, outward-bound from Quebec City to Liverpool. In those days everybody in tourist class on an ocean liner or propeller-driven airplane was equal, paying the same fare. But nowadays, after you have probably forked out something like a thousand bucks for your jumbo jet "hospitality" (that is to say, cattle-class) return ticket to Paris, Rome, or wherever, the odds are that the three-hundred-pound behemoth shoehorned into the seat beside you, having promised to fly on a rainy Wednesday while wearing his track suit with the Day-Glo stripes, most likely has acquired his ticket for $49.95, payable in twelve installments. Furthermore, that price includes four nights in a two-star hotel, a clutch of theater tickets, and coupons that will yield magnums of Dom Perignon in any number of restaurants. And if that isn't enough to put you in a yippee mood, it turns out that fatso, once he has stowed away a ton of "carry-on" luggage under his seat *and* yours, turns out to be a compulsive nose picker or a master of the silent fart, earning *you* dirty looks from everyone in the rows ahead and behind. And, naturally, he is a talker, who wants to know how the world is treating you and where do you hail from?

"Montreal," I once said, on an Air France flight out of New York.

"Gosh. That's my favorite city in the United States."

Freeze out your seatmate, and he retaliates by fishing into one of his bulging flight

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bags and surfacing with the latest Garfield paperback, which has him quaking with laughter for the next four hours of flight time. The rest of the jet, it goes without saying, is usually filled with shrieking babes, kids playing tag, teenagers jerking their heads in time to the rock beat leaking out of the Walkman clamped to their ears, middle-aged wits who feel entitled to flirt with the stewardesses ("I've got the time, if you've got the place"), and battalions of Japanese tourists, laden with state-of-the-art camcorders, shooting film of cloud formations, of flight attendants propelling drink trolleys, and of each other standing up, sitting down, and performing other astonishing feats.

Then, after bouncing about at thirty-five thousand feet for seven hours, snug as a sardine in a tin, you land, ears throbbing with pain, and line up in an overheated hall to pass through immigration. This will take an hour, maybe more, because either you have arrived just after a flight from Columbia, every passenger a suspected drug smuggler, or there's an obviously impecunious African immediately ahead of you in line, who claims to be a citizen of Finland, and is armed with an inch-thick passport that opens like an accordion and calls for a half-hour examination by the suspicious immigration officer.

Finally, you reach your hotel—smelly, eyes bloodshot—only to be welcomed by the news that they have no record of your reservation or that your room, overlooking a parking lot, won't be ready for another four hours. Never mind. The bar is open, and there you can contemplate the ordeals that lie ahead: all those museums and churches and castles, the snotty waiters you will have to tolerate. Because you are a North American, they will unfailingly check you out to make sure you are wearing shoes, and treat you as if you were about to sample your first glass of wine.

Ah, but it was utterly different—still an amazing, even daring adventure—when the incomparable Mark Twain, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, set out on an "Excursion to the Holy Land, Egypt, the Crimea, and intermediate points of interest" on *Quaker City*, a paddle-steamer, sailing out of New York, on June 8, 1867. In Twain's time the world had not yet become a village to be avoided. Escape was still possible and novelty was the happy rule.

"The proprietors of the *Daily Alta Californian*," wrote Twain in his autobiography, "engaged me to write an account of the trip for that paper—fifty letters of a column and a half each, which would be about two thousand words per letter, and the pay to be twenty dollars per letter."

Twain, thirty-two years old at the time, set sail as just another freelance hack, and he returned as the first true master of the American idiom. This he accomplished at a time when, as Stephen Leacock wrote in his biography of Twain, "of American literature there was much doubt in Europe; of American honesty, much more, of American manners more still." But I knew nothing of this when I first came across the writings of Mark Twain, introduced to them, like most boys of my generation, through *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a gift from an uncle.

I would like to claim that reading Twain for the first time made for an epiphany, but it wasn't the case. I was far more taken with *Scaramouche*, *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Robin Hood*. Settling into bed for the night, I dreamed of humiliating the dastardly Sheriff of Nottingham with my dazzling swordplay, or galloping off with d'Artagnan and his chums, all for one, one for all. Titled ladies were my heart's desire. My problem was I knew kids like Tom Sawyer, who might try to con me into painting their fence. It was familiar and, therefore, couldn't count as literature, like, say, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," which I had to copy out ten times after my class master caught me ogling a copy of *Sunbathing* in his Highroads to Reading class.

I was a slow learner. And so only later, after I had read *Huckleberry Finn* for a second time, did I grasp that I was in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

presence of a great writer, somebody who could convey more about the white American's prejudice against blacks in one seemingly effortless colloquial exchange than many a polemicist could manage in ten fulminating, fact-bound pages.

Huck tells Aunt Sally, "It was the grounding of the steamer that kept us back. We blowed out a cylinder head."

"Good gracious. Anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."

The advertisement announcing the sailing of *Quaker City* claimed there would be cabins sufficient to accommodate "a select company" of 150 on a "first-class steamer," which was provided "with every necessary comfort, including a library and musical instruments," as well as "an experienced physician on board." The price per passage, on what was actually America's first venture into mass tourism, a harbinger of the heavy traffic to come, was $1,250 for adult passengers, who were advised that five dollars per day, in gold, would be sufficient to handle their needs on shore.

Anticipating what would be the case in many an over-promoted tour in years to come, the promised shipboard celebrities were notable by their absence. Urgent duties, a bemused Twain noted, obliged the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher to give up the idea, and the Indian wars compelled Lt. Gen. Sherman's presence on the plains.

> A popular actress had entered her name on the ship's books, but something interfered, and *she* couldn't go. The "Drummer Boy of the Potomac" deserted, and lo, we had never a celebrity left!

As with so many of today's so-called "love boats," advertised by photographs of decks adorned with sexy, bikini-clad young women, what *Quaker City* did in fact deliver was a plethora of what my daughter calls cotton-tops, or as Twain had it, venerable people, among them, three ministers of the gospel, eight doctors, sixteen or eighteen ladies, "several military and naval chieftains with sounding titles, an ample crop of 'Professors' of various kinds, and a gentleman who had 'Commissioner of the United States of America to Europe, Asia, and Africa' thundering under his name in one awful blast!" And none of them, I'm sure, suspected that they would be the victims of a rollicking satire that still reads freshly more than a century after its first publication.

In Twain's below decks cabin, which he was to share with a young gentleman, there was room to turn around in, but not to swing a cat. Happily, however, the saloon bar, which the unregenerated dubbed the "Synagogue," was a good fifty or sixty feet long, and the ship's company boasted not one, not two, but five captains.

Having crossed the Atlantic several times myself on modern liners equipped with stabilizers—still a sick-making ordeal in heavy seas—I can only marvel at what Twain and his companions must have endured on their little paddle-steamer. But Twain makes reference to only one Atlantic gale, wherein *Quaker City* "climbed aloft as if she would climb to heaven—then paused an instant that seemed like a century, and plunged headlong down again, as from a precipice."

First port of call was in the Azores, and it becomes instantly clear that the free-wheeling Twain, bless him, is not going to be shackled by political correctness. Oh dear, oh dear. Given today's touchy political climate, I suspect there is sufficient kindling in *The Innocents Abroad* to light a fire of protest under Portuguese, Italians, Moslems, Catholics, Turks, Greeks, feminists, Arabs, American Indians, and other sensitive types. I have no doubt that *The Innocents Abroad*, released today, would be banned in schools, the author condemned as a racist, and possibly, just possibly, finding himself the subject of a *fatwa*.

The Portuguese people of the Azores, wrote Twain, lie, and cheat the stranger, and are "slow, shiftless, sleepy, and lazy." He didn't fancy the women of Tangier:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> I have caught a glimpse of the faces of several Moorish women (for they are only human, and will expose their faces for the admiration of a Christian dog when no male Moor is by), and I am full of veneration for the wisdom that leads them to cover up such atrocious ugliness.

Unaware of what would become modish everywhere today, he added, "They carry their children at their backs, in a sack, like other savages the world over." But Twain did allow that "weak, stupid, ignorant" Abdul-Aziz, Sultan of Turkey, Lord of the Ottoman Empire, was a true representative of a people, which is to say he was "by nature and training filthy, brutish, unprogressive, superstitious."

He was not enchanted by Civitavecchia, which he adjudged "the finest nest of dirt, vermin and ignorance we have found yet, except that African perdition they call Tangier, which is just like it."

Poor Twain was born too soon to appreciate that a "dwarf" is actually a "vertically challenged" person and that "cripple" has been displaced by "physically disadvantaged."

> If you want dwarfs—I mean just a few dwarfs for a curiosity—go to Genoa. If you wish to buy them by the gross, for retail, go to Milan. . . . But if you want to see the very heart and home of cripples and human monsters, both, go straight to Constantinople.

A writer who usually got his priorities right, he was perturbed by the scarcity of whiskey in Constantinople, and didn't much care for the Greeks, Turks, or Armenians in town:

> [Their] morals consist only in attending church regularly on the appointed Sabbaths, and in breaking the ten commandments all the balance of the week. It comes natural to them to lie and cheat in the first place, and then go on and improve on nature until they arrive at perfection.

Twain was appalled by "the usual assemblage of squalid humanity" that waited outside the pilgrims' camp on the outskirts of Damascus:

> They sat in silence, and with tireless patience watching our every motion with that vile, uncomplaining impoliteness which is so truly Indian, and which makes a white man so nervous and uncomfortable and savage that he wants to exterminate the whole tribe.
>
> These people about us had other peculiarities, which I have noticed in the noble red man, too: they were infested with vermin, and the dirt caked on them until it amounted to bark.

He pronounced Magdala thoroughly Syrian, that is to say, "thoroughly ugly, and cramped, squalid, uncomfortable, and filthy." In Jerusalem, a city of a mere fourteen thousand souls when Twain visited, he inveighed against Moslem rule:

> Rags, wretchedness, poverty and dirt, those signs and symbols that indicate the presence of Moslem rule more surely than the crescent-flag itself, abound. Lepers, cripples, the blind, and the idiotic, assail you on every hand, and they know but one word of but one language apparently—the eternal "bucksheesh."

Twain couldn't know that something like 135 years later the right-wing editor of *The Jerusalem Post*, David Bar-Illan, would brandish Twain's condemnation of Moslem rule as a license for Israel's sole possession of the city.

The majesty of the Sphinx impressed Twain, but not the "corrugated, unsightly mountain of stone" that formed the great pyramid of Cheops. In Cairo, of course, he was immediately surrounded by the usual rabble, demanding bucksheesh. But Twain wasn't nearly as naughty about Cairo as an earlier distinguished visitor, the twenty-seven-year-old Gustave Flaubert, who was there in 1849, and wrote in *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour* that on his first

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

day in Cairo he was immediately surrounded: "The girls were making imitation fart sounds with their hands. The boy was excellent—short, ugly, stocky: 'If you will give me five paras I'll bring you my mother to fuck. I wish you all kinds of prosperity, especially a long prick.'"

I didn't get to see the Great Pyramid myself until 1992, but, obviously, not much had changed since Mark Twain had come and gone. Approaching the Great Pyramid on foot, my wife and I were instantly besieged by vendors and supplicants, old men and boys, offering T-shirts, posters, sun hats, bottles of mineral water, camel or horseback rides, a helping hand to enter the pyramid—everybody after bucksheesh, the grease that turns the Egyptian wheel. Furthermore, our guide, licensed to speak English, had to be a direct descendant of one Twain had endured. He was contemptuous of the smaller, sometimes crumbling pyramids at Giza: "They was for nobbels or womens and womens not equals mens."

Leading us to the Sphinx, he asked, "Why is it the Sphinx has it head mans and body of lions? It is to show intelligence of mens and muskels of beast togethered."

One hundred and twenty-six years after it was first published, *The Innocents Abroad* can be read not only for its literary delights, and the pleasures of reading a major writer when he was young and just beginning to flex his muscles, but also as an enduring, no-nonsense guide for the first-time traveler to Europe and the Holy Land.

The grandchildren of the mendacious guides Twain suffered here, there, and everywhere, will still inveigle travelers "into shirt stores, boot stores, tailor shops," where they are entitled to a commission on sales. Perdition catch all guides, wrote Twain, after an experience in Italy with a guide who claimed to be "the most gifted linguist in Genoa, as far as English was concerned, and that only two persons in the city beside himself could talk the language at all." In a memorable exchange, Twain and his chum, the doctor, do manage to get the better of this particular guide, whom they had dubbed Ferguson:

> "Come wis me, genteelmen!—come! I show you ze letter writing by Christopher Columbo!—write it himself!—write it wis his own hand! come!"
>
> He led us to the municipal palace. After much impressive fumbling of keys and opening of locks, the stained and aged document was spread before us.
>
> "What I tell you, genteelmen! Is it not so? See! handwriting Christopher Columbo!—write it himself!"
>
> We looked indifferent—unconcerned. The doctor examined the document deliberately, during a painful pause.—Then he said, without any show of interest:
>
> "Ah—Ferguson—what—what did you say was the name of the party who wrote this?"
>
> "Christopher Columbo! ze great Christopher Columbo!"
>
> Another deliberate examination.
>
> "Ah—did he write it himself, or—or how?"
>
> "He write it himself!—Christopher Columbo! he's own hand-writing, write by himself!"
>
> "Why, I have seen boys in America only fourteen years old that could write better than that."
>
> "But zis is ze great Christo—"
>
> "I don't care who it is! It's the worst writing I ever saw. Now you mustn't think you can impose on us because we are strangers. We are not fools, by a good deal. If you have got any specimens of penmanship of real merit, trot them out!—and if you haven't, drive on!"

Shocks of recognition abound in *The Innocents Abroad*. I am willing to swear, for instance, that the Fergusons Twain suffered in Milan, and elsewhere, were the progenitors of that babbler of statistics who drove my wife and me to Masada, on our extended tour of Israel in 1992. "Their tongues are never still," wrote Twain. "They talk forever and forever . . . they interrupt every dream, every pleasant train of thought, with their tiresome cackling."

Only last year, arriving at a hotel in Paris,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I stood by, a helpless victim, as the doorman removed our bags from a taxi, deposited them at the front door and extended his hand for a tip. Then another man carried our bags as far as the registration desk, and extended his hand. Finally, a third man lugged the bags to our room, and held out his hand for the obligatory *pourboire*. So I clapped hands at Twain's description of the avarice he witnessed at Vesuvius:

> They seize a lady's shawl from a chair and hand it to her and charge a penny; they open a carriage door and charge for it—shut it when you get out, and charge for it; brush your clothes and make them worse than they were before—two cents; smile upon you—two cents; bow, with lick-spittle smirk, hat in hand—two cents.

Like Twain, I have visited the Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) in the Old City of Jerusalem, and descended the steps of the Dome of the Rock to gawk at the fabled Stone of Foundation, where, it is claimed, Adam was moulded from dust. This is amply proven, wrote Twain, "by the fact that in six thousand years no man has ever been able to prove that the dirt was *not* procured here whereof he was made."

It was on this busiest of rocks, according to legend, that Cain killed Abel, and Abraham, put to the test by Jehovah, prepared to sacrifice Isaac. Jesus is said to have preached here. And this is exactly where Mohammed stopped on his *isra*, his celebrated nocturnal journey to heaven, in which he traveled from Mecca to Jerusalem and ascended to heaven on his horse. "Where Mohammed stood," wrote Twain, "he left his foot-prints in solid stone. I should judge he wore about eighteens."

In his autobiography, Twain wrote that he "did not lean heavily on the *Alta* letters" in composing *The Innocents Abroad*. "I found they were newspaper matter, not book matter." He used several of the letters, ten or twelve perhaps, and claims to have churned out the rest, some two hundred thousand words, in sixty days. On one level, surely, *The Innocents Abroad* was meant as an antidote to the insufferably romantic, cliché-ridden travel books of the period, written by intimidated colonials genuflecting to European culture and exaggerating the charms of the Holy Land. Giving them the raspberry, Twain wrote:

> If any man has a right to feel proud of himself, and satisfied, surely it is I. For I have written about the Coliseum, and the gladiators, the martyrs, and the lions, and yet have never once used the phrase "butchered to make a Roman holyday." I am the only free white man of mature age, who has accomplished this since Byron originated the expression.

Twain was especially scornful of one Wm. C. Grimes, a hack much given to florid descriptions, and another writer, identified only as C. W. E., author of *Life in the Holy Land*, who easily outdid today's most gushing travel brochure in his celebration of the Sea of Galilee, pronouncing it a "terrestrial paradise." The truth of the matter, wrote Twain, is that the Sea of Galilee, stripped for inspection, "proves to be only an unobtrusive basin of water, some mountainous desolation, and one tree."

Familiar as he was with the grandeur, and incredible variety, of the yet untamed American continent, Twain was far from enchanted with Palestine, venturing that it was a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land. "The hills are barren," he wrote, "they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape." But Twain was alert to beauty whenever he stumbled on it, as he did once in Smyrna, where he observed a passing camel train:

> They stride along these streets, in single file, a dozen in a train, with heavy loads on their backs, and a fancy-looking negro in Turkish costume, or an Arab, preceding them on a little donkey completely overshadowed and rendered insignificant by the huge beasts. To see a camel train laden with the spices of Arabia and the rare fabrics of Persia come

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> marching through the narrow alleys of the bazaar, among porters with their burdens, money-changers, lamp-merchants, Alnaschars in the glassware business, portly cross-legged Turks smoking the famous narghili, and the crowds drifting to and fro in fanciful costumes of the East, is a genuine revelation of the Orient. The picture lacks nothing.

Mark Twain, then a largely unknown young journalist enjoying a freebie passage, set sail on *Quaker City* at a time when America's best-known humorists were Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby and Orpheus C. Kerr, long since forgotten, as well as Artemus Ward. Possibly trying too hard for knee-slappers, the early pages of *The Innocents Abroad* suffer from being a tad broad, proffering more burlesque than inspired satire. But as the voyage proceeds, Twain's voice starts to emerge, gathering assurance and force. The book begins to soar. The comic genius who will go on to write *Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi* declares himself, staking out a territory.

One of the joys of reading *The Innocents Abroad* is the opportunity it affords us of watching the young Twain liberate himself, and American writing, from the yoke of the European tradition, doing a necessary demolition job on it, and the pilgrims who revere often second-rate pictures, proclaiming them masterpieces.

"O, wonderful!"

"Such faultless drawing!"

"Such feeling!"

The painting of *The Last Supper* was seriously flawed for Twain, because he couldn't tell whether the disciples were Hebrews or Italians.

> The Italian artists painted Italian Virgins, the Dutch painted Dutch Virgins, the Virgins of the French painters were Frenchwomen—none of them ever put into the face of the Madonna that indescribable something which proclaims the Jewess, whether you find her in New York, in Constantinople, in Paris, Jerusalem, or in the Empire of Morocco.

With the best of intentions, Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote a foolish polemic denying that there was any such thing as a "Jewish face," but Twain, poor man, didn't realize that identifying "that indescribable something" that proclaims it could one day be adjudged politically incorrect. Mind you, even the most exacting prejudice-sniffer employed by B'nai B'rith's Anti-Defamation League would have his work cut out trying to label Twain an anti-Semite. If anything, he was a Judeophile. In *The Innocents Abroad*, he contrasts the plight of Jews confined to European and Near Eastern ghettos with their fulfillment in America, where, he wrote, they were treated just like human beings, instead of dogs:

> They can work at any business they please; they can sell brand new goods if they want to . . . they can practice medicine among Christians. They can associate with them, just the same as one human being does with another human being; they don't have to stay shut up in one corner of the town; they can live in any part of the town they like best . . . they never have to run races naked through the public streets, against jackasses, to please the people in carnival time; [in America] they never have been driven by soldiers into a church every Sunday for hundreds of years to hear themselves and their religion especially and particularly cursed; at this very day, in that curious country, a Jew is allowed to vote, hold office, yea, get up on a rostrum in the public street and express his opinion of the government if the government doesn't suit him! Ah, it is wonderful.

Trading on his satirist's license, overstating his case, Twain extols the pristine quality of Lake Tahoe over one as inconsequential as Lake Como, and the grandeur of his cherished Mississippi opposed to such piddling bodies of water as the Tiber or the Arno, failing to acknowledge the splendor of the bridges over the latter river, or the incomparable beauty of the city it divides. The dull waters of Lake Como, he wrote, would not compare with the wonderful

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

transparence of Lake Tahoe, "where one can count the scales of a trout at a depth of a hundred and eighty feet." Those dark and bloody Florentines, he ventured, call the Arno a river, and they help out the delusion by building bridges over it. I do not see why they are too good to wade." And the Tiber, he complained, "is not so long, nor yet so wide, as the American Mississippi—nor yet the Ohio, nor even the Hudson."

I must also grudgingly acknowledge that those cultural ruffians who have now taken so vociferously against what they denounce as Eurocentrism do, alas, sometimes make a valid point. Celebrating Columbus, in the Pinta's shrouds, Twain wrote, "he swung his hat above a fabled sea and gazed upon *an unknown world* [emphasis mine]." A world unknown to Europeans, whose pretensions Twain punctures with abandon in *The Innocents Abroad*, but not to the Indians who were rooted there since time immemorial.

Twain, a writer with an enduring affection for chicanery, and for those who can get away with it, takes obvious delight in the Church of Rome's holiest of Christian relics in the Azores:

> We visited a Jesuit cathedral nearly two hundred years old and found in it a piece of the veritable cross upon which our Savior was crucified. It was polished and hard, and in an excellent state of preservation as if the dread tragedy of Calvary had occurred yesterday instead of eighteen centuries ago.

Then, lo and behold, in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, he is shown "some nails of the true cross, a fragment of the cross itself, a part of the crown of thorns." And, in the chapel of St. John the Baptist, in Genoa, there are the relics again.

> We find a piece of the true cross in every old church we go into, and some of the nails that held it together. I would not like to be positive, but I think we have seen as much as a keg of those nails.

But when he finally gets to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in Jerusalem, he discovers that the piece of the true cross no longer rests in the niche where they used to preserve it.

> The Latin priests say it was stolen away, long ago, by priests of another sect. That seems like a hard statement to make, but we know very well that it *was* stolen, because we have seen it ourselves in several of the Cathedrals of Italy and France.

The vandalism of the *Quaker City*'s pilgrims, a harbinger of offenses to come, was a recurring embarrassment to Twain. They break off fragments of Noah's tomb; and, in Damascus, from the tomb of Nimrod the Hunter. Servicing their insatiable appetite for souvenirs, they are at it again in Jerusalem, "hacking and chipping away at those arches that Jesus looked upon in the flesh." In Nazareth, coming upon a chapel rising out of a huge boulder, Twain mused, "Our pilgrims would have liked very well to get out their lampblack and stencil-plates and paint their names together with the names of the villages they hail from in America, but the priests permit nothing of the kind." In Egypt, however, the indefatigable pilgrims are at it once more, actually hacking away at the Sphinx.

Were Twain alive today I imagine he would be relieved to know that the Japanese have displaced Americans as Europe's most acquisitive and objectionable tourists. Only last week in the Louvre my wife was unable to even glimpse the *Mona Lisa* in passing. It was surrounded by hordes of Japanese, none of them the least bit interested in looking at the painting, all of them posing to have their pictures taken in turn before it. They were, however, unable to chip away at it, the *Mona Lisa* now sheltered by a glass guard.

A major innovator's work is never done. As I write in London, on March 24, 1995, I learned from this morning's *Times* that Prince Charles, speaking at the British Council's English 2000 project, has warned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

against the threat to "proper English" from the spread of the American vernacular, which he pronounced very corrupting. Because of American influence, he said, "People tend to invent all sorts of nouns and verbs, and make words that shouldn't be. I think we have to be a bit careful, otherwise the whole thing can get rather a mess."

Obviously Prince Charles has never read Mark Twain, or Mencken on the American language, or Twain's successors (say, Hemingway, Bellow, Toni Morrison, and Raymond Carver, among others) and is unaware of how they have enriched a living language that is constantly evolving. He should be sent immediately a copy of *The Innocents Abroad*, the American coming-of-cultural-age book, the first major offering of a great writer, which belongs on a small shelf of Twain classics, alongside *Life on the Mississippi*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Connecticut Yankee*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The drop too much: Emerson's eccentric circle

James W. Tuttleton

The magnificent dreamer, brooding as ever on the renewal or reedification of the social fabric after ideal law, heedless that he had been uniformly rejected by every class to whom he has addressed himself and just as sanguine and vast as ever;—the most cogent example of the drop too much which nature adds of each man's peculiarity.

—Emerson on Amos Bronson Alcott

I was much taken with the image of the young Ralph Waldo Emerson, convalescing in Florida in the winter of 1827, playing "a kind of poor man's golf by propelling green oranges with his stick along the beach at St. Augustine." Equally surprising was the verbal snapshot of the elderly Emerson, in his seventies, wrapped in a shawl on a cool evening, enjoying conversation and remarking "the singular comfort" of a good cigar. Somehow such pastimes seem much too human, material, and commonplace for America's greatest idealist thinker. America's most peculiar thinker, too, by Carlos Baker's lights. In any case, such colorful imagery and verbal precision—as well as sharp characterization and a fine gift for storytelling—are hallmarks of Baker's new major biography, posthumously published, called *Emerson Among the Eccentrics*.[1] Baker was a longtime Professor of English at Princeton and author of *Hemingway: A Life Story*; *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision*; and *The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Phenomena of Transference in Poetry*. He was also the author of four volumes of fiction and two of poetry, which may account for his splendid literary gifts. Baker died in 1987, before he could finish *Emerson Among the Eccentrics*, but it was so nearly complete that the rescue of the manuscript and the appearance of the work, however belated, constitute a publishing event of some importance.

Baker's intention in writing this compendious study of Emerson's life is suggested by notes for the book he drafted in the early 1970s. His aim, he wrote, would be

> to write what will amount to a new biography of Emerson, developed by reference to some of his leading friendships, chiefly but not exclusively literary. These will include Alcott, Edward Thompson Taylor, Jones Very, Margaret Fuller, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Theodore Parker, Walt Whitman, Mary Moody Emerson, Charles Newcomb and Ellery Channing. Through [Emerson's] connections with these, it should be possible to watch the unfolding of his religious, literary, and political ideas, his changing views of nature, man and God; to show how his friends reflected, contradicted, partly diverged from, or zealously misrepresented his philosophical and ethical teachings; to use their views to throw light on his, and his to throw light on them in a program of

1 *Emerson Among the Eccentrics: A Group Portrait*, by Carlos Baker, with an introduction and epilogue by James R. Mellow; Viking, 608 pages, $34.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> spiritual ecology, complicated by the fact that he both half-created the climate of opinion by which he was nurtured, while partly adapting his opinions to the ideological environment which local and national events thrust upon him.

As may seem evident from these remarks, Baker's design was conceived long before the present requirement that biography and literary criticism must reflect a politically correct position on race-class-gender victimization. What he has given us here is a solid, old-fashioned composite biography of some of the most interesting figures in the American Renaissance. But the plan also outlines too tall an order, involving the recreation of something like the whole intellectual and artistic culture of the Concord-Cambridge-Boston triangle from the 1830s to the 1880s—the era of Transcendentalism, or "The Newness," and its aftermath. Thus, while it is no surprise to learn from James R. Mellow's informative introduction that *Emerson Among the Eccentrics* was a half-century in the making, the book cannot be said to have fulfilled completely its ambitious intent. It is, however, a major recreation of Emerson's world from which the general reader and the specialist alike will profit.

It was Baker's theory of biography that "one cannot take the measure of a man from disjunctive episodes lifted from his youth or old age; biography is the study of the whole man in the context of time." If Emerson can't really be measured apart from the context of his time, what was that context like? Baker's answer is confident: Emerson created for himself a context of friendships involving a host of eccentrics, and to know him fully is to take the measure of these peculiar people who flocked to, circled about, and deeply affected him. Hence the subtitle of the book: *A Group Portrait*.

For all its six hundred pages, *Emerson Among the Eccentrics* does not really capture Emerson in youth. The group biography begins in about 1830, with Emerson in his late twenties, on the verge of his resignation from the Unitarian ministry in Boston and about to become the Transcendental poet and philosopher who will announce: "I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred, none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no past at my back." His first wife, Ellen, has died of consumption, and he has since been remarried to Lydia Jackson and will soon begin a family, including the children Waldo, Ellen, and Edward. I mention these family details because Baker is particularly good at bringing alive the internal dynamics of the extended family, which included (at the outset) Emerson's mother, his Aunt Mary Moody, and his brothers Charles and Edward. Such a method fulfills Emerson's belief that

> if a man wishes to acquaint himself with the real history of the world, with the spirit of the age, he must not go first to the state-house or the court-room. The subtle spirit of life must be sought in facts nearer. It is what is done and suffered in the house . . . in the temperament, in the personal history, that has the profoundest interest for us. The great facts are the near ones.

Emerson's second wife, Lydia, whom he promptly renamed Lidian (but always called "Queenie"), got more than she bargained for in marrying so distinguished a literary figure. Emerson had inherited a substantial sum from the estate of his first wife, and, in due course, he was to earn even more as a writer and lecturer. But his celebrity—and their growing family—brought into the household a larger and larger group of friends and acquaintances each of whom made some kind of claim upon her husband and on their resources of time and money. Overnight visitors were a constant in Concord; and some of them, like Margaret Fuller (who was in love with Emerson) stayed for weeks or even months. And at times the whole responsibility of the household devolved upon Lidian, as Emerson was absent on long lecture tours. At one point the young Henry David Thoreau also lived in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their household, at the top of the second-floor stairs, serving for more than two years as the household major-domo and general factotum assisting Lidian in running the establishment.

Emerson, usually ensconced in his scriptorium, was so given over to *solitude* that he invited these friends into his house out of a need for *society*—the two extremes representing the poles of his consciousness. Indeed, he encouraged many of his admirers to move to Concord just to be near him. Elizabeth Peabody called the Emerson household "The Mount of Transfiguration," in view of what it supposedly did to those who visited there.

It is a small wonder, then, that the beautiful and elegant wife Lidian Emerson developed some major quirks in dealing with her new husband and his peculiar friends. She was not Emerson's intellectual equal, had little interest in his more abstruse metaphysical inquiries, and could not compete with some of the intellectual women—like Caroline Sturgis and Margaret Fuller—who pursued Emerson with a spiritual hunger that now seems indistinguishable from the erotic. Lidian reflected the stress of her situation by neurotic, anorexic, perhaps even bulemic behavior. She was, in any case, often depressed, dyspeptic, given to emotional outbursts, rail thin, obsessed with odd diets like poppies and oatmeal, and generally suspicious of ordinary food. She was so cadaverous that her friends called her the "walking skeleton," and she insisted that the food we don't put into our mouths does us more good than the food we do. If some of her odd mannerisms surprised their friends, Emerson was silent and kept the sweet independence of his own soul.

Emerson was doubtless flattered by the attention of the young Harvard graduate Thoreau, who so fully incarnated the Emersonian principles of self-reliant individualism, the doctrine of perpetual revelation, and reverence for nature as the manifestation of the divine indwelling spirit. "Thoreau gives me in flesh and blood and pertinacious Saxon belief, my own ethics. He is far more real, and daily practically obeying them, than I," Emerson observed. He wrote a splendid character sketch of Thoreau, describing the youth as short in stature, but "firmly built, of light complexion, with strong, serious blue eyes, and a grave aspect." Outdoors, Thoreau wore "a straw hat, stout shoes, strong gray trowsers, to brave scrub oaks and smilax and to climb a tree for a hawk's or a squirrel's nest. He waded into the pool for the water-plants, and his strong legs were no insignificant part of his armor." Baker adds that Thoreau was astonishingly hirsute, with arms "thickly matted with fur, like the pelt of an animal." So committed was Thoreau to the out-of-doors, so completely was he taken up with the wildness of things, especially while living out at Walden Pond, that Emerson and the children called him "the Oneida Chief."

But Thoreau was a true eccentric, and in time Emerson was to become vexed with his young protégé, complaining of "the Personality that eats us up." Thoreau chilled "the social affections" by contradicting everything one said, whether casually, or seriously, in conversation. "'On hearing any proposition,' Emerson wrote, 'his first instinct . . . was to controvert it,' and in a manner 'never affectionate but superior, didactic,' scornful of the 'petty ways' of his interlocutors, 'like a New England Socrates at his most eristic.'" Emerson was to complain that "all his resources of wit and invention are lost to me in every experiment, year after year, that I make, to hold intercourse with his mind. Always some weary captious paradox to fight you with, and the time and temper wasted." The bickering, in the long run, wasn't worth it. But to Thoreau, being self-reliant seemed to require it.

Baker was of the opinion that Thoreau was in love, at least platonically, with Lidian Emerson. And it is true that, after he moved out of the Emerson household, Thoreau wrote her some letters very tender, rather exalted, and utterly transcendental in feeling. But however that may be, it is clear that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Thoreau was contending, largely in vain, against a powerful, authentic genius. A great many people—James Russell Lowell in *A Fable for Critics* among them—dismissed Thoreau as a mere clone of the master:

> How he jumps, how he strains, and gets red in the face
> To keep step with the mystagogue's natural pace . . .
> Fie, for shame, brother bard; with good fruit of your own,
> Can't you let Neighbor Emerson's orchards alone?

Indeed, not only was Thoreau's thinking often indistinguishable from Emerson's, at times so was his handwriting. (For some years a Thoreau manuscript was misattributed to Emerson, so nearly identical were their holographs.) Thoreau is well worth reading on his own, especially in *Walden*, but the similarities are there. What seems evident is that Thoreau's only way of dealing with so formidable an influence as Emerson was continually to contradict him. This devotion to Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance became a tic, then a bad habit, and finally a contentious character trait. "Thoreau wants a little ambition in his mixture," Emerson concluded. What he lacked was the ambition to be himself, someone truly great: "instead of being the head of American Engineers, he is captain of a huckleberry party."

Of particular interest is Carlos Baker's portrait of the eccentric Edward Thompson Taylor, whose extemporaneous homilies at the Seaman's Bethel in North Square in the 1840s offered the liveliest sermons in the state. "Father" Taylor—an "old-fashioned, shouting, hallelujah Methodist"—was called to minister to whatever sailors were in port. He was one of those shadowy peripheral figures mentioned in many biographies and literary histories, but here he comes into his own as the master of religious verbal pyrotechnics. Emerson was drawn to anyone exhibiting evident inspiration. Taylor preached to "rough sailors in red shirts in the central pews, and at the sides and in the gallery all manner of visitors: women and children, pale young unitarian ministers, Harvard intellectuals, the seriously devout, and the merely curious, all of them eager for another demonstration of Father Taylor's prowess." Baker quotes Emerson to the effect that "there was no snoozing in the Concord Lyceum while Taylor stood at the lectern. 'The wonderful and laughing life of his illustration keeps us broad awake,' Emerson wrote. 'A string of rockets all night.'" Emerson was so taken with Taylor that he studied his manner closely, only to become disillusioned and conclude that, after all, there *was* no manner; it was all verbal smoke and mirrors, *sui generis*, a personality acting with spontaneous enthusiasm, rapt in religious ecstasy. The "utter want and loss of all method, the ridicule of all method" in his sermons, "bereaved" them, Emerson thought, of an intellectual power they might have had. Still, this colorful maker of homespun nautical metaphors was very nearly Emerson's "perfect orator," and his flamboyant sermons later won him a commendation in Emerson's essay "Eloquence."

Perhaps even more like Emerson in religious sensibility was the improvident transcendental seer and progressive educator Amos Bronson Alcott. Married to Abigail May and father of the young "celestials" Anna, Louisa May, and Elizabeth Alcott, this eccentric attained a kind of dubious celebrity as an "Orphic Poet" and founder of the Temple School on Tremont Street in Boston. Emerson was enchanted with Alcott's idealism, copied many of his aphorisms and sayings into his notebook, and praised him everywhere as the incarnation of otherworldly spiritual genius.

Elizabeth Peabody (Hawthorne's sister-in-law) and Margaret Fuller were Alcott's sometime teachers, and the children who attended his school were some of the most hapless innocents ever victimized by an idiosyncratic American educational theory. (Alcott emphasized conversation as a means of educing the children's already intuited

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knowledge of truth—even for subjects of which they could not possibly have had any understanding.) In one term, he conducted some conversations with the children on the Gospels. When Miss Peabody published her *Record of a School* (1835), with Alcott's blasphemous dialogues with the eight-year-olds about Jesus, the parents withdrew the children in outrage, and Alcott was well-nigh finished as a schoolmaster. His whole life long Alcott spent his time devising one failed enterprise after another. One of the most famous instances of Alcott's "continuous scuffling with untoward circumstances" was his creation of the short-lived commune Fruitlands.

The Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, learning that Alcott had sunk to supporting his family by chopping wood and plowing fields, wrote Elizabeth Peabody that "such a combination of day labor and high thought made this man 'the most interesting object in our Commonwealth.'" Doubtless thinking of the Scottish poet Burns, Channing hailed Alcott as "Orpheus at the Plough." Emerson linked him with "Apollo serving among the herdsmen of Admetus." After anonymously paying Alcott's rent bill of $52 per annum for some time, Emerson claimed that "Alcott was valuable enough to be 'maintained at the public cost in the Prytaneum,'" and even at one point launched a fund to ameliorate the Alcotts' condition, laying out $500 of his own money so that they could go to Europe.

While Emerson admired and supported so staunch a Transcendentalist ally, he eventually came to see that Alcott had zero national influence and had in fact become something of a local joke. He also came to bridle at Alcott's fatiguing monumental ego. In 1848 Alcott protested to Emerson: "You write on the genius of Plato, of Pythagoras, of Jesus, of Swedenborg, why do you not write of me?" But why should such egotism have surprised Emerson? Alcott was only following the Emersonian admonition: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." Eventually the Alcott girls got old enough to support their egotistical father and hapless mother. But Louisa May, who brought in considerable cash with her gothic romances and *Little Women*, had the last word on her father's otherworldly improvidence in a satirical reminiscence of Fruitlands called "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873).

Other important oddities in Baker's gallery of eccentrics include Jones Very, Ellery Channing, and Channing's sister-in-law Margaret Fuller. Emerson's celebration of Channing as a rising young poet of genius is solid evidence, if any were needed, that Emerson was a saintly and generous man who simply had no ear for verse. Yet year after year he praised (and even published in *The Dial*) the effusions of a poetaster who could write (of Caroline Sturgis, in "The River"):

> Sweet falls the summer air
> Over her form who sails with me;
> Her way, like it, is beautifully free,
> Her nature far more rare;
> And is her constant heart of virgin purity.

If verses like these struck Emerson as having "a certain wild beauty immeasurable" that caused "a happiness lightsome and delicious" to fill "my heart and brain," Margaret Fuller was blunt in telling Caroline Sturgis: "Of Ellery's verse I think not much." And when she took over editorship of *The Dial*, she rejected his poems. She thought not much of her brother-in-law the man either, since Ellery played the role of an infantile, temperamental, romantic poet, abusing her sister Ellen by wandering off on any mere whim, abandoning her to the ladies at lying-in time, and failing to support her financially.

The poets Ellery Channing and Jones Very were both drawn to Emerson by virtue of his verse, his moral vision, and his religious ecstasy—an ecstasy reported if not really experienced. But in Very's case, it *was* felt: he was, Emerson thought, a true ecstatic. Very had distinguished himself as a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tutor in Greek at Harvard and had begun to make a name for himself as a critic of classical poetry and as a poet himself. But Very's students began to remark his quite odd behavior; and when he invaded the study of Henry Ware, a professor at the Harvard Divinity School, and announced that the Second Coming was at hand and was "*in him*," Harvard moved immediately to put the boy on a medical leave. In Salem, where Hawthorne had lived in his youth, Very marched right into people's homes, declared himself to be the Messiah come again, and acclaimed his sonnets as directly inspired by God. Doubtless Very had heard the Emersonian admonition in "The Divinity School Address": "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity." Unfortunately, like Allen Ginsberg, the deranged Very believed it could be done.

From this distance it appears that not the Deity but dementia possessed Jones Very; but his Transcendentalist friends were disposed to be tolerant of his strangeness. Emerson invited him into his house for five days, observed and talked to him, and judged Very "'profoundly sane' and wished all the world 'were as mad as he.'" Ellery Channing—doubtless thinking of the Coleridgean term for intuition, said that the young poet had "not lost his *Reason*" but "his *Senses*." Elizabeth Peabody claimed that Very's frenzy was a temporary event "caused by overtaxing his brain in the attempt to look from the standpoint of Absolute Spirit." And Bronson Alcott concluded that Very was merely "diswitted in the contemplation of the holiness of Divinity." And so he was. Baker remarks that Very "was the same man who asserted, quite seriously, that he felt it an honor to wash his own face, since it was the outward temple of the inward spirit."

In the fall of 1842, Emerson struck the note of ambivalence that always resounded when he wrote about either solitude or society. He could not make up his mind whether he did, or did not, want these friends about him. "What obstinate propensity to solitude is this? I fancied that I needed society and that it would help me much if fine persons were near, whom I could see when I would, but now that C[hanning] and H[awthorne] are here, and A[lcott] is returning, I look with a sort of terror at my gate."

One source of terror was the frequent visitor Margaret Fuller, his co-editor of *The Dial*, who had become wildly unsettled by Emerson's liberationist theology of love. Bright and ugly, Margaret was the ripest peach on the bough. But as no husband had yet plucked her from the branch, she had set her sights on Emerson. In *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (1852), he was to write that she was "like the queen of some parliament of love, who carried the key to all confidences." But he had to impound the key in their case, to stop her from trying to eroticize their relationship. Lidian was likewise a distinct obstacle to Margaret's claiming Emerson's heart. "Nothing makes me so anti-Christian, and so anti-marriage," Margaret confided to her diary, "as these long talks with Lidian." No wonder, since Lidian was extolling the sacramental nature of marriage and the wickedness of trying to seduce another's husband.

What is remarkable about a great many of Emerson's eccentric friends is how acidly they competed with each other for his attention and approval, often carping and criticizing each other to him, with the effect, as Baker puts it, that "Emerson's long dream of a cooperative assemblage of gifted individualists was . . . rapidly dissipated by their inability to get along with one another." But their asperity with each other was sometimes matched by their vexation with the master himself, who was intent on preventing any undue intimacy. Emerson answered them by writing an essay, "Friendship," in which he told his disciples that friendship was ideally a relationship between two large formidable natures who were "mutually beheld, mutually feared." The friend was to be "to thee for ever a sort of beautiful enemy, untamable, devoutly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

revered, and not a trivial conveniency to be soon outgrown and cast aside." The relationship with this beautiful enemy was to be entirely spiritual: "It is foolish to be afraid of making our ties too spiritual, as if so we could lose any genuine love." In another place (again, probably thinking of Fuller), he writes, "Leave this touching and clawing. Let him be to me a spirit. A message, a thought, a sincerity, a glance from him, I want, but not news nor pottage." But in fact too close a relation, for Emerson, was dangerous:

> Though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their visions, lest I lose my own. It would indeed give me a certain household joy to quit this lofty seeking, this spiritual astronomy, or search of stars, and come down to warm sympathies with you; but then I know well I shall mourn always the vanishing of my mighty gods.

Emerson was fully aware that his friends considered him aloof, but in one of his most remarkable statements, he told them in "Friendship" that "the condition which high friendship demands is ability to do without it."

Margaret Fuller's letters to Emerson exaggerate Lidian's holiness and her own readiness for some self-defining, extravagant, even sexual action. "Who would be a goody that could be a genius?" she asked in her journal (implicitly rejecting the patriarchal adage: "Be good sweet maid, and let who will be clever"). Fuller was also preemptively absolving herself for whatever evil that men might afterward accuse her of doing. By 1845 she was openly advocating the socialist (or Fourierist) line on marriage, declaring the holy institution to be oppressive to women and productive of spousal violence, infidelity, infanticide, and the marital uses of arsenic. *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) was the opening volley in the century's feminist movement, and Margaret celebrated it by abandoning New England, with its "bloodless men," and moving to New York, where she worked briefly for Greeley's *Herald Tribune*. Italy was the final field of her activities, for there, during the Risorgimento, she became an activist for the revolutionist Mazzini, and had a probably illegitimate child with Giovanni Ossoli, an impoverished Italian aristocrat. After the collapse of the revolution, the three of them died in a shipwreck off Fire Island in 1850.

There were a great many other eccentrics in Emerson's world whom Baker has engagingly sketched in here. One is Theodore Parker, the polymath abolitionist Unitarian minister who set a standard for learning and moral courage none of the others could match. Another is Walt Whitman, the lower Broadway incarnation of Emerson's idea of the poet, the beginning of whose career the Sage had so generously saluted. Thoreau went down to New York and met Whitman; he found him to be "an extraordinary person," one "full of brute power." Alcott found him less appealing, describing Whitman as "broad-shouldered, rouge-fleshed, Bacchus-browed, bearded like a satyr, and rank." If Whitman didn't bathe often enough for Alcott, Emerson was likewise embarrassed to have Whitman's "pomes" turn priapic in "Children of Adam" and "Calamus." This led E. P. Whipple rightly to complain that *Leaves of Grass* "had every leaf but the fig leaf." A third oddity was Charles Newcomb, a rich Roman Catholic whose religious fanaticism was too much for his fellow Brook Farm denizens—especially since Newcomb "decorated his room with ferns, rushes, and pictures of Jesus and selected Catholic saints, and persisted in reading aloud from the church litany at all hours of the night." Baker remarks that "for reasons that remain obscure he insisted on wearing gloves and a veil as he slept."

This last detail is suggestive of Hawthorne, the Salem solitary who, in the 1840s—before his marriage to Elizabeth Peabody's sister Sophia—also lived for a time at Brook Farm. Hawthorne in due course found ridiculous the transcendental socialism of his high-minded companions at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Farm. He also kept a very wary distance from Emerson, even satirized him for living in cloud-cuckoo land in "The Celestial Railroad" and "Earth's Holocaust," and wrote a biting critique of the Brook Farm communitarians in *The Blithedale Romance.* It was Hawthorne who first noticed the oddity of the Emerson circle, describing Thoreau and Ellery Channing as among "those queer and clever young men whom Mr. Emerson (that everlasting rejecter of all that is, and seeker for he knows not what) is continually picking up by way of genius."

For Hawthorne, none of this circle had in greater superfluity "the drop too much which nature adds of each man's peculiarity" than Emerson himself. In his own time Emerson had a reputation for sublime sanity, an equilibrium of spirit and a serenity of soul beyond that of any other man. But Emerson was at times more eccentric than his friends. Granted that he was grief-stricken at the death of his first wife, Ellen, a beautiful young woman who died of consumption in 1831. But what are we to make of this bald entry in his journal, some *thirteen months later*: "I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin"? His reasons for so ghoulish an act are not explained in the journal.

Moreover, in 1857, long after his young son Waldo had died from scarlet fever—a death memorably eulogized in that remarkable poem "Threnody"—Emerson recorded in his notebook: "I had the remains of my mother and of my son Waldo removed from the tomb of Mrs. Ripley to my lot in 'Sleepy Hollow.' The sun shone brightly on the coffins, of which Waldo's was well preserved—now fifteen years. I ventured to look into the coffin. I gave a few white-oak leaves to each coffin, after they were put in the new vault, and the vault was then covered with two slabs of granite." Nothing else is said of this event in the journal. But Baker remarks that "at home he told his daughter, Ellen, that he had opened Waldo's coffin. He did not elaborate, although he could hardly have helped recalling the day in 1832 when he had opened the coffin of that other Ellen whose name his eldest daughter bore."

What accounts for such abnormal acts? Was it mere morbid curiosity? A wish to see what time and decay had done to his image of his beloved wife and child? Since death had no spiritual reality for Emerson, did he hope to find some confirmation of the primacy of soul? Was it a desire to reconcile himself to death by seeing what had happened to their physical bodies? In the absence of fact, there can be no end to speculation of this kind, but, whatever answer one may produce, most of us will feel that Emerson's behavior was distinctly eccentric, if not pathological.

Because Emerson was one of the greatest writers America has produced, the tendency to hagiography in his friends and admirers has become infused into much of the literary criticism written about him. Baker's work is salutary in reminding us that mixed with Emerson's genius were traits of character and oddities of behavior that most men would regard as strange indeed. Beyond that, however, is a matter that Baker does not develop. And that is the negative impact, on American culture, of the transcendental doctrines Emerson espoused.

I am not referring here to the doctrine of self-reliance, which most parents teach their children quite naturally, though not perhaps in so absolutist a degree. I refer to what happens in a culture like ours when institutions *as such* are attacked as vicious, when people are told that the church and temple, the college and the political party, the Red Cross, the employee's union, and the veteran's group (and so forth) are all unnecessary organizations and are indeed inimical to one's self-development, and that all one needs to do is to consult one's own inner oracle and act out one's own inner imperative, however antisocial it may be. To be told, Do your own thing, is for most people, it seems to me, ultimately disorienting and will leave them floundering and adrift and (even worse) determined—such is the Emersonian imperative—to *act*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out their idiosyncrasies, to distill to the last "the drop too much which nature adds of each man's peculiarity." The 1960s represented, in my view, a widespread, disastrous, vulgar translation into action of such Emersonian doctrines, a sort of Age of Aquarius reincarnation of the 1830s "Newness." It produced some colorful personalities and genuinely eccentric communitarian "lifestyles" worthy of Fruitlands. But we have still not recovered from that decade's more sinister attack on the foundations of American culture and the moral life. We still have not directly challenged the Emersonian belief that there is no standard of right and wrong outside the self. And we have not recovered from his assault on the institutions by which we naturally and rightly organize our educational, political, religious, social, and intellectual life. It is through these institutions alone (however imperfect they may be) that jointly and mutually we implement our most deeply held convictions about the national life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Death fugues: the poems of Paul Celan

by John Simon

Poetry is the meeting point of parallel lines—in infinity, but also in the here and now. It is where the patent and incontrovertible intersects with the ineffable and incommensurable. It can be as complicated as Mallarmé or Paul Celan, or as simple as Heine or Verlaine, but something about it, however strongly it is felt, surpasses comprehension. It is what, when thought of, made A. E. Housman's face bristle, and his razor inoperative; it is what made Emily Dickinson's whole body so cold no fire could ever warm her.

There is a wonderful story I. A. Richards used to tell that I remember only imperfectly. It seems that word got back to the University of Chicago that young David Oppenheimer, who had been given a grant to pursue his scientific studies in—Vienna, was it?—was writing poetry instead. So a great scientist, his mentor (I forget his name, alas), was deputized to restore him to his senses. Poetry or science, the disciple remonstrated, it's really all the same. Not so, rejoined the master: science is saying in language that everyone can understand things nobody knew before; poetry is saying what everyone knew all along in language that nobody can understand. At this point, Ivor Richards would draw himself up and sound and look even more vatic than usual, and declaim: "He was absolutely right: poetry is saying something everyone always knew in language that passes all understanding."

The great modern poets, starting with Rimbaud and Mallarmé, were striving to push utterance to its limits, to where it approached or attained the unutterable. The rest, of course, is silence. As the decades wore on, however, the problem became somewhat different: how to wrest meaning, perhaps even beauty, from a language that had been used and abused by dictatorships and their propaganda machinery and concentration camps quite literally to death. For poetry in German, the problem was especially acute. It is understandable how scarcely and accidentally surviving victims of genocide mistrusted or even rejected the language of the mass murderers. Yet the rejection had to be couched in the selfsame tongue. Or did it? Theodor W. Adorno had proclaimed repeatedly and influentially that, after Auschwitz, no poems could be written. It has always amazed me how wide an acceptance this profoundly mistaken notion was to gain.

Poetry, though, kept being written—even by survivors—and fairly soon after the war a generation of younger poets acquired imposing stature. The most important figures were Karl Krolow, Walter Höllerer, Heinz Piontek, and Paul Celan, to be followed a little later by Ingeborg Bachmann and Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Older poets enjoying longevity also contributed to the renewal and vindication of German verse; in the end, even Adorno had to retract his sweeping pronouncements, while George

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Steiner and others were still mouthing them elsewhere. Among all these poets, the one who was to achieve the greatest international resonance was Paul Celan (1920–1970).

Let me skip ahead and across to the Anglophone world, where Bruno Bettelheim wrote about Celan's "Todesfuge": "It was this poem which immediately established [Celan] as Germany's—and probably Europe's—most important poet of his generation." And George Steiner (in *After Babel*, 1975) announced that Celan was "almost certainly the major European poet of the period after 1945." In Germany, Rolf Hochhuth published his provocative play *Der Stellvertreter* ("The Deputy") in 1963. It contained mini-treatises in its stage directions, in one of which we read about the dangers, at least in drama, of "proceeding in the manner of, say, Paul Celan in his masterly poem 'Death Fugue,' which has translated the gassing of Jews entirely into metaphors." Because, Hochhuth continued, "great as is the power of suggestion that emanates from word and sound, metaphors inevitably hide the hellish cynicism of this reality." Contrariwise, the distinguished poet-essayist Hans Egon Holthusen had praised Celan's ability to "sing the Holocaust in a language that, from first line to last, is true and pure poetry, without a trace of reportage, propaganda and argumentation." He extolled "Death Fugue" as "one of the most magnificent occasional poems [*Zeitgedichte*] we possess." This essay, published in Holthusen's collection *Ja und nein* (1954), infuriated the hypersensitive Celan, whose paranoia where German critics were concerned was boundless.

"Todesfuge" is indeed a major poem of our century, reaching the acme of fame by being reprinted in its entirety in *The New York Times Book Review*, along with condign praise, in conjunction with the appearance in English of Celan's *Speech-Grille and Selected Poems* (1971, translated by Joachim Neugroschel), a full year after the poet had committed suicide by leaping into the Seine. There have been books about Celan even in English, notably Jerry Glenn's *Paul Celan* (1973); Israel Chalfen's important and beautifully written 1979 account of the poet's early years was brought out in translation here in 1991.[1] Nevertheless, it is *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*,[2] by John Felstiner, that makes the most inclusive attempt at criticism and biography thus far published in English. Felstiner, a professor of English and Jewish studies at Stanford, has also written books on Neruda and Max Beerbohm, revealing him as a scholar of catholic taste. His knowledge of Judaica in both Hebrew and Yiddish was especially useful for a study of Celan and the writings about him; it goes without saying that Felstiner also knows his German. His book is a significant achievement that, unlike many such endeavors, is at least as much criticism as biography; in a mere 344 pages, Felstiner analyzes most of Celan's important works in both verse and prose—if not in full, at least in generous part.

The first, and probably most debatable, characteristic of the book is that it reproduces the overwhelming majority of poems discussed only in the English of Felstiner's translation. Although we are told otherwise, this may well have been the publisher's way of saving space, and it strikes me as unfortunate. To be sure, in exceptional cases the original is included, but with a poet whose effects are so idiosyncratic, and whose meanings so elusive, the original text must always be given, if only in fine print at the bottom of the page. True, Felstiner includes in his analyses phrases and words of Celan's German—and sometimes, I repeat, the whole poem—but that is not the same as allowing readers with knowledge of German (or even without it) to get the full sense (or at least sound) of what the poet wrote. Would one want a

1 *Paul Celan: A Biography of His Youth*, by Israel Chalfen; Persea Books, 214 pages, $24.95.

2 *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, by John Felstiner; Yale University Press, 344 pages, $30.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

critical biography of a composer without quotations from his music?

As for the quality of Felstiner's translations, it is generally high, just short of what a major poet-translator could offer. Felstiner agonizes over getting the meaning, sound, and ambiguities of the text right. Where he has to take liberties, he explains them; sometimes he even admits to total bafflement. Now and then he also adduces a rival translation. All this is splendid, but has its disadvantages as well. At times, Celan's life gets shortchanged in favor of the work.

To be sure, not everything about the poet's private life is available, despite an ample correspondence and a profusion of memoirs by intimates and not-so-intimates. Felstiner has spoken to everyone who could be interviewed, whenever possible face to face. He has enjoyed the full cooperation of Celan's widow, Gisèle Lestrange Celan (since deceased), and son, Eric. But two lacunae immediately hit us: though the book is illustrated, there are no pictures of Gisèle or Eric, or of the women in Celan's life. Indeed, least to be had from the book is information about the poet's marriage and love life.

A useful biographical précis is provided by Felstiner himself in his introduction to the correspondence between Celan and his fellow poet Nelly Sachs:[3]

> Paul Celan's parents came from Galicia and Bukovina, the "easternmost" reach (he emphasized) of the Austrian empire. His upbringing, though it entailed moderate religious observance and a Bar Mitzvah, would still have left him more-or-less comfortably engaged, like countless other Jews, with western European culture. But Celan underwent a drastic education: Iron Guard anti-Semitism, Soviet occupation, Nazi invasion, ghetto, forced labor, overnight deportation and loss of both parents in Transnistria. Toward the war's end he abandoned Czernowitz (renamed Chernovtsy), spent two years in Bucharest, fled to Vienna, and in 1948 settled in Paris, becoming a translator and above all a poet writing against the grain of a mother tongue the murderers had brutally abused.

What other salient facts need mention? Celan was born Paul Antschel, in Romanian transliteration Ancel, which, for purposes of euphony, he anagrammatized into Celan. He had no use for his stern and uncultured father, but worshiped his refined and literate mother, who adored her only child. It was she who insisted that only High German be spoken in the house, and it was only relatively late that Paul, a remarkable linguist, evinced interest in Yiddish and Hebrew, with both of which he became conversant. It was this intense closeness to his mother that kept his relations with girls (even the charming Ruth Lackner and the beautiful Rosa Leibovici, both, as Chalfen relates, very much in love with him) apparently platonic. Not until his late twenties, in his Bucharest years, did he lose his virginity to the capital's prostitutes, though (as Chalfen also reports) he complained that they were "dreadfully primitive." He did, however, have close relationships with young men, mostly fellow students, although there is no evidence of anything more than comradeship.

Celan was, for the most part, withdrawn and aloof, sometimes remaining silent during an evening's party. Yet there were also periods of entrancing merriment, when he would do sparkling impersonations, vivid enactments of scenes from plays (notably Shakespeare), and spellbinding poetry readings—though never of his own poetry, which he kept secret. Crucial experiences of his youth were nineteen months in various unspeakably vicious labor camps, and the loss of his parents under particularly guilt-inducing circumstances. Paul had left home in a huff to hide out elsewhere one weekend—the usual time for deportation round-ups—and, returning home, found the door locked and his parents gone. Deported to Transnistria, his father died of typhus; his

3 *Paul Celan–Nelly Sachs: Correspondence*, edited by Brenda Wiedemann and translated by Christopher Clark; The Sheep Meadow Press, 112 pages, $19.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beloved mother, too weak to work, was shot in the back of the head. Paul could never quite get over the probably mistaken notion that, had he been there, he could have shielded his parents in the camp, and somehow brought them back alive.

Celan was always passionate about botany, and knew the names of flowers in many languages. Besides German, he had perfect Romanian (in which he wrote some fine poems and prose), French (for a year, he had studied medicine in Tours), Hebrew, Russian (he translated officially approved Russian writers into Romanian), Ukrainian (more translations, providing desperately needed funds), English (a visit with an aunt in London enabled Paul to see Shakespeare at the source), and also a command of Italian, Portuguese, and some Spanish (which he must have studied on his own). Throughout his life, translation, especially of poetry, was of great artistic and financial importance to him, as were studies of Romance and English literature. In Paris he studied philology and German literature at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, where he later taught.

Of particular meaning in his later years was his correspondence with the German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs (1891–1970), then living as a refugee in Sweden. The two poets admired each other's work, and cheered each other up in their ever-increasing depression. Both were to win major awards in Germany, which they were hesitant to collect—but collected anyway—and both, especially Sachs, spent time in mental hospitals and received shock treatment. They sent each other their poems—Sachs rather more than Celan—and received hearty mutual encouragement and admiration, even though Sachs's later work was pretty poor. They saw each other once in Zurich, and, a bit later, in Paris, where Sachs briefly visited at the Celans' invitation. Sachs was religious, Celan was not; yet they shared two quasi-mystical experiences involving a special sort of light sighted on the water in Switzerland, and on a wall of the Celans' Paris apartment.

Late in his short life, Celan made it to Israel, where he had further opportunities for agonized soul searching about why he did not relocate there, as so many of his Bukovinian co-religionists did. With one of them, Ilana Shmueli, he conducted a love affair during his relatively short stay in Israel, then corresponded with her until his death. On or about April 20, 1970, he threw himself into the Seine, and, although a strong swimmer, drowned. His body wasn't found until several days later, and was buried on the very day his dear Nelly Sachs died.

During the last part of his life, Celan was living apart from his spouse; he was, as Felstiner writes, "a sick man, sometimes violent and even suicidal." It is not clear how complete the break with his wife was. She had been Gisèle de Lestrange, member of an aristocratic French Catholic family that intensely disapproved of her marriage to a Jewish refugee. Her mother, widowed late in life, became a nun, with whom her family could converse only through a grille, most likely the speech-grille that became the title, first of a poem by Celan, and later of an entire collection. Indeed, most of Celan's collections took their titles from a poem or phrase in a previous collection, presumably as a conscious or unconscious reaching for continuity in the poet's fragmented life. Gisèle was a graphic artist, whose work was, we are told, highly regarded, though what reproductions of it I have seen leave me cold. The titles of her—usually very abstract—works were often supplied by her husband.

Why the suicide? Obviously, there was much in Celan's past that painfully clung to him. Yet he also had good times with his wife and son, and to some extent enjoyed the success of his poetry, which earned him the respected Prize of the City of Bremen, and the coveted Büchner Prize of the City of Darmstadt. But Celan always imagined that prizes, publications, invitations to read or lecture had to do with attempts by Germany to assuage its bad conscience, rather

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

than with genuine recognition of his work. Thus even essentially laudatory articles about it by such prominent critics as Holthusen and Günter Blöcker struck him as patronizing, if not downright insulting. Typically, he resented it equally when no mention was made of his early masterpiece, "Todesfuge," and when it was singled out after he himself felt he had surpassed it. Even its inclusion in the curriculum of many German schools failed to appease him.

What hurt him most, though, was the Goll affair. Yvan (or Ivan) Goll was an Alsatian Jewish poet living in Paris, writing mostly surrealist poems and plays in German and French, often in collaboration with his wife. Claire Goll had in her youth, though Felstiner doesn't mention this, been Rilke's mistress, a thing that could go to any woman's head. I myself visited with the Golls at the American Hospital in Neuilly during Ivan's terminal illness, and found the couple most stimulating. So, no doubt, did the young Celan when he was asked to translate some of Goll's French poetry into German. As Felstiner notes, Celan translated "three collections, which went unpublished because, Claire Goll later claimed, they bore too closely the 'signature' of Paul Celan." Now, it is true that Celan was a rather free translator—though nowhere near so free as, say, Robert Lowell; nevertheless, the result was almost always impressive and, ultimately, undamaging to the reputation of the originals.

So it was most ungracious of Claire Goll to launch, later on, an attack on Celan in a German magazine, asserting and trying to document that the younger man's poetry plagiarized that of her late husband. This envy-motivated accusation had some repercussions, but both the German Academy as a body, and most leading poets individually, rallied to Celan's defense. Still, given his overdelicate nature, Celan was to nurse this grievance to the utmost, and it became perhaps the chief goad of his paranoia. (It is worth noting how many poets in all languages ended up more or less insane; one could not begin to match their numbers among painters, composers, and prose writers.) So it was that Nelly Sachs, during one of the bad phases of her persecution mania, which is what ailed Celan as well, summoned Paul to her sanatorium bedside, then countermanded the summons in a telegram that arrived too late. In Stockholm, Celan was either not admitted to Nelly's room, or, more likely, not recognized by the older poet.

Still, why suicide? Clearly, terrifying depression. I can visualize Celan jumping off the very Pont Mirabeau (near which he lived at the end of his life) that inspired Apollinaire's famous poem "Le Pont Mirabeau," from which Celan quoted in one of *his* poems. Apollinaire's poem stresses not only our sad transience, experienced especially keenly watching the river flow beneath the bridge ("Ni temps passé/ Ni les amours reviennent"), but also our burdensome, anxiety-ridden existence ("Les jours s'en vont je demeure"). Kinesis and stasis can be equal enemies to the poet. This may well be the source of what the Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš has noted in his book *Homo Poeticus*: "Yes, the defining factor in the literature and thought of Central Europe is just that: ironic lyricism. Perhaps it's a combination of Slavic and Hungarian lyricism, with the ironic part, like a grain of salt, coming from the Jews." A grain of salt, Kiš might have added, that could as easily turn into a grain of sand inside a poetic oyster.

It is indicative that, of Celan's favorite poets—Hölderlin, Rilke, Trakl, and Mandelshtam—one died mad, and two prematurely, in war or the gulag. And his favorite prose writer, Kafka, was a Jew and perennial imaginary victim, whose defense mechanism was, precisely, Central European ironic lyricism. Celan, who translated a good deal of Mandelshtam, also rendered into German the narration in Alain Resnais's hallucinatory documentary, *Night and Fog*. It is not hard to imagine how much that first and best film about Auschwitz

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

must have possessed the poet's mind. Not only must the translator have relived the horrors of the Holocaust, he must also have endured a recrudescence of his guilt at surviving. This, in turn, might have become aggravated by remorse about his love affair with Ilana—more traumatic for a habitual nonwomanizer—and torment at his separation from wife and child.

"Of course survivors sustained deep damage," observes Terrence Des Pres in *Writing into the World*, "but let us . . . consider, despite the damage done, the strength revealed." Celan's work is a lasting memorial, "an example worth knowing when we contemplate the darkness ahead." Perhaps the best short definition of Celan's poetry comes from the literary historian Hans Mayer, who knew the poet; it is a summation that all writers on Celan have formulated in not dissimilar terms. Mayer calls it a "poetic practice *des gestalteten Verstummens*," which English can render only clumsily as "the embodied falling silent." Celan himself has evoked it in two verses from "Strähne" ("Strand") singled out by Karl Krolow in *Aspekte zeitgenössischer deutscher Lyrik*: "Dies ist ein Wort, das neben den Worten einherging,/ ein Wort nach dem Bild des Schweigens." ("This is a word that went about alongside words,/ a word in the likeness of silence.") And, again quoting, Krolow continues: "The word is then '*ein kleines unbefahrenes Schweigen*' [a small trackless silence]."

Here it behooves us to give examples of Celan's poetry, starting with a relatively early, 1950 poem in elegant rhyme, which, as Felstiner notes, uses a stanza form borrowed from German baroque religious verse:

So bist du denn geworden
wie ich dich nie gekannt:
dein Herz schlägt allerorten
in einem Brunnenland,

wo kein Mund trinkt und keine
Gestalt die Schatten säumt,
wo Wasser quillt zum Scheine
und Schein wie Wasser schäumt.

Du steigst in alle Brunnen,
du schwebst durch jeden Schein.
Du hast ein Spiel ersonnen,
das will vergessen sein.

In translating this lyric, the usually sober and conscientious Felstiner permits himself a game that should be forgotten: together with one Melissa Monroe, he renders the piece into a rhymed pseudo-Dickinson poem, which he boasts of having passed off as a Dickinson original. But the poem is not much like Dickinson (whom Celan later came to admire and translate); rather, it is in the best German lyric tradition, with added Celan characteristics. Herewith my own, non-Dickinsonian version:

So then you have become
as I have never known you:
your heart beats everyplace
in a country of wells

where no mouth drinks and no
shape [figure] borders the shadows,
where water springs into gleaming [semblance]
and gleam foams like water.

You descend into every well,
you float [sway, hover] through every gleam.
You have thought up a game
that wants to be forgotten [seeks oblivion].

Bukovina is a country of wells, and one might easily take this for a poem of landscape and love, except that Celan, uncharacteristically, revealed it to be about his vanished mother. The rhymes and near-rhymes are sinuously incantatory, yet a vague unease prevails. Even that the dedicatee of such a quasi-amatory poem is the mother is somewhat disquieting. The ghostly mother figure blends with the landscape in a sort of matriarchal pantheism. There are the resplendent compounds, *Brunnenland* and *allerorten*, but most of the key words are pared-down monosyllables.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alliteration in *sch-* flows through the poem: the murmur of wavelets.

The mother haunts the depths of wells from which no one drinks—graves?—and where no shape (or figure, or body) borders (or edges, or hems) the shadows (or shades)—which must be the realm of the dead. Yet in these shadowlands water springs into sunlight or gleaming, or, via its German homonym, semblance. So the shadows are really unbordered by human forms that would cast them (a typical Celanian reversal or paradox), and the life-giving water is only an illusion. Yet even such a semblance can foam, can bubble up in memory: the dead mother is recalled, ebulliently alive.

So the mother has both descended into the dark and risen into gleaming day. And then those mysterious, multivalent verses: "You have thought up a game/ that wants to be forgotten" (or "seeks oblivion"). Is that game the teasing, tormenting haunting of the son? Or is it merely a sneaky kind of death? And by whom or what does the game want to be forgotten? In any case, a terrible game, but still only a game. An indefinable irony blends with the sadness.

Now for a somewhat later poem (1952), again to the mother, but more characteristic of the poet's mature mode:

Zähle die Mandeln,
zähle, was bitter war und dich wachhielt,
zähl mich dazu:

Ich suchte dein Aug, als du's aufschlugst und
niemand dich ansah,
ich spann jenen heimlichen Faden,
an dem der Tau, den du dachtest,
hinunterglitt zu den Krügen,
die ein Spruch, der zu niemandes Herz fand,
behütet.

Dort erst tratest du ganz in den Namen, der
dein ist,
schrittest du sicheren Fußes zu dir,
schwangen die Hämmer frei im Glockenstuhl
deines Schweigens,
stieß das Erlauschte zu dir,
legte das Tote den Arm auch um dich,
und ihr ginget selbdritt durch den Abend.

Mache mich bitter.
Zähle mich zu den Mandeln.

As translated by Felstiner:

Count up the almonds,
count what was bitter and kept you waking,
count me in too:

I sought your eye when you glanced up and no
one would see you,
I spun that secret thread
where the dew you mused on
slid down to pitchers
tended by a word that reached no one's heart.

There you first fully entered the name that
is yours,
you stepped to yourself on steady feet,
the hammers swung free in the belfry of your
silence,
things overheard thrust through to you,
what's dead put its arm around you too,
and the three of you walked through the evening.

Render me bitter.
Number me among the almonds.

Felstiner tries as hard for the rhythm as for the meaning, which is admirable, but can distort what the poem is saying from the very start. Thus "Count up" renders the disyllabic *Zähle* but puts an unwelcome spin on the meaning, which is simply "count." "Der Tau, den du dachtest" is not quite "the dew you mused on." For *dachtest*, literally the past tense *thought*, I would prefer *imagined*. The pitchers, I would say, are *guarded* or *preserved*, rather than *tended*. I would translate the next line as, "Only there did you wholly enter the name that is yours"—shades of Mallarmé on Poe: "Ainsi qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change." *Strode* would be better than *stepped*. And, please, not "things overheard" and "what's dead," but "the Overheard" and "the Dead,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with capitals to drive home the personification. Finally, that "render me bitter." True, it gets across the disyllabic verb, but it has to resort to the more elaborate *render*, instead of the simple *make*, and incurs a slight singsong with the repeated *-er* ending. As for the suggestive echo in *Mache* and *Mandeln*, no one could get it in English.

In his comments on the poem, Felstiner is characteristically perceptive and thorough in adducing the significance of almonds in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, and even operetta, as well as in Celan's work. He is also sedulous in rounding up possible allusions in the poem, including "*Zählappell*, a head count in Nazi camps." The associative zeal, though often suggestive, can carry him too far afield. He writes: "It's possible, though only just, to think here of the smell of almonds given off by Zyklon B, the gas the SS used." Here that cautionary "only just" seems almost overscrupulous. In other places, where it might be more appropriate, it is absent. For example, Felstiner labors valiantly, but I think in vain, to establish parallels between Celan and Marianne Moore. Elsewhere, in the poem "Blume," he will link "The stone in the air, which I followed./ Your eye as blind as the stone" with the famous passage in "Death Fugue," where, at Auschwitz, "we shovel a grave in the air"—about as far from the stone in the air as one can get.

Even more bizarre is Felstiner's finding in these verses of a late Celan poem, "die Offenen tragen/ den Stein hinterm Aug" ("the Open ones carry/ the stone behind their eye") something that "reminds me of the statue in Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo': 'for there is no place on it/ that does not see you. You must change your life.'" One sometimes gets the feeling with Felstiner that the things farthest apart are only a stone's throw away. This reaches the heights of the ludicrous when, for Felstiner, Celan and his wife, Gisèle, become "Lan-celot" and Guinevere.

One more example. Discussing Celan's Büchner Prize acceptance speech, Felstiner writes (note, by the way, the dangling construction): "Along with the pervasive 'Allow me,' Celan studs his talk with *Meine Damen und Herren* ('Ladies and Gentlemen') eighteen times over, with a spate toward the end. While this honorific keeps the poet conversant [*sic*] with his listeners, it also impugns their honor, as Jerry Glenn suggests, and even—who knows?—evokes the politeness the SS used." This is very strange. It seems far-fetched, though not preposterous, to endow the repeated rhetorical apostrophe with irony, but it is absurd to invoke the politeness of the SS, assuming that such politeness there was.[4]

But to get back to the almond poem. Here, as on occasion elsewhere, Felstiner does not come to grips with the real interpretive difficulties. What is the secret thread with its putative dew? What is the unheard word? What are those pitchers? And so on. It appears to me that line four, about Paul's mother's opening her eyes wide with no one looking at her, refers to the moment when she was shot from behind. The secret thread is Paul's empathy, which allows the mother's dying thoughts—a benison that her gentleness exudes even in death—to be collected like dew into the pitchers of memory. The son's recollections preserve an utterance that found no destination—except that Celan, once again, paradoxically inverts the statement. It is the utterance that preserves the memory rather than vice versa: the rememberer is sheltered by what he remembers.

There—in death and in her son's memory—the mother becomes fully herself. In

4 For the useful translation into English of Celan's sparse but not unimportant prose, see *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop (The Sheep Meadow Press, 67 pages, $15.95). The translator aptly remarks, "For Celan, whose poems moved ever closer to silence, prose was too noisy a medium." Unfortunately, Miss Waldrop reduces the decibels overmuch, as when, in a particularly poetic passage, she renders "überflogen von Sternen, die Menschenwerk sind" as "with manmade stars flying overhead."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

life, she was repressed ("the belfry of your silence"), but now her essence rings out loud and clear. The Overheard—what she hinted at—joins the solid contours of finality (the Dead), and together with Mother they walk into the dark. Felstiner's "the three of you" is feeble for *selbdritt*. "You walked, a threesome [or, better yet, triune], through the evening." There remains only for the son to achieve full identification with mother by absorbing all her suffering, by inheriting her bitter fate.

I point out my differences with Felstiner hesitantly, impressed as I am with the thoroughness of his research, the care that went into his translations, and the sensitivity with which he evaluates the achievement. If, at times, he is overindulgent with certain recurrent devices and excessive obscurities, these foibles are an earnest of the devotion and effort needed for an undertaking as arduous as this book. Yet Felstiner does not address Celan's exaggerated tendency to invert relationships, noted by Holthusen, who remarks on how the poet "quite simply stands the real world on its head. 'The sea above us,' he says, 'the hill of the deep,' 'the stars of noon.'" And again: "At several climaxes of his poetry, paradox becomes the punch line (*Pointe*) of the statement . . . 'we part intertwined' or 'a hanged man strangles the rope.'" This conceit is so compulsive in Celan that it almost merits the stern word *trickery* that Holthusen employs. It goes so far (as Felstiner notes but does not comment on) as to deliberately misquote another poet. Where Verlaine, in *Sagesse*, writes simply, "Ah! quand refleuriront les roses de septembre!," Celan gives us the intentional inversion, "Oh quand refleuriront, oh roses, vos septembres," which strikes me as excogitated and even unfair to Verlaine.[5]

In his last phase, Celan could be overwhelmingly opaque; but, on occasion, also magnificently pellucid. As an example of the former, take this poem in its entirety:

> Mandelnde, die du nur halbsprachst,
> doch durchzittert vom Keim her
> dich
> ließ ich warten,
> dich.
>
> Und war
> noch nicht
> entäugt,
> noch unverdornt im Gestirn
> des Lieds, das beginnt:
> *Hachnissini*.

What are we to make of this, one of the rare poems Felstiner reproduces with text and translation facing each other?

> Almonding one, you half-spoke only,
> though all trembled from the core,
> you
> I let wait,
> you.
>
> And was
> not yet
> eye-reft
> not yet enthorned in the realm
> of the song that begins:
> *Hachnissini*.

Thus Felstiner, who also explains that this was written for a young woman Celan knew in Czernowitz, of whose survival in Israel he became joyously cognizant. But he does not say whether this was Ilana Shmueli, with whom the poet was soon to have an affair on his trip to Israel. Felstiner does, however, note that Celan "has turned the obsolete verb *mandeln* ('to yield almond kernels') into . . . the noun *Mandelnde*, 'almonding woman,'" and that for Celan "that oval-eyed sweet or bitter fruit had signaled Jewishness."

Felstiner further reminds us that the poet's mother (surprise! surprise!) "also hovers near this almonder, along with the Shechinah, the female presence of God." He

5 To be sure, this happens, not in a translation of Verlaine, but in Celan's own comic poem "Huhediblu."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

duly reveals that the coinage *entäugt* can mean both *dis-eyed* and its exact opposite. "Both senses feed into a blinding which is visionary truth, as the Shechinah in exile wept out her eyes . . . Celan's 'enthorned' also wrests a Jewish destiny out of Jesus' crown of thorns. Whatever the poet has 'not yet' become—'eye-reft,' 'enthorned'—ties pain to hope."

He then explicates *Hachnissini* ("Identified easily enough," he remarks cavalierly and overoptimistically) as "a Hebrew imperative to a feminine singular, 'Bring me in,'" and as the opening of "a popular 1905 lyric by the first modern Jewish poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik . . . 'Bring me in under your wing,/ and be mother and sister to me. . . .'" Felstiner rightly concludes, "Celan had no sister, had lost his mother, and sought them both in a beloved." He ends by adducing Bialik's, and thus Celan's, biblical sources, and how the erotic element stands for "a return from homelessness," i.e., conversion to true Judaism. All this is admirable elucidation, but stops short of full explication and evaluation; the poem strikes me as a total failure. Like so many of Celan's lesser efforts—I think that he published far too much—it is a doodle: the skeleton of a poem that remains unfleshed-out.

Yet this is not to say that other short pieces of Celan's do not score, or that the poet, even in his last and most self-destructive phase, did not have moments of serendipitous aptitude to write a gorgeously translucent poem. Such a one is "Es stand," which also rates parallel German and English in Felstiner. As he explains, the "Danish skiff" (really a *ship*) refers to a monument erected in North Jerusalem to the ships in which the Danes in 1943, secretly and gallantly, ferried Jews across to the safety of Sweden. The monument is surrounded by pines, and Celan viewed it with Ilana, his mistress on the trip to Israel (a trip he, characteristically, cut short):

ES STAND
der Feigensplitter auf deiner Lippe,
es stand
Jerusalem um uns,

es stand
der Hellkiefernduft
überm Dänenschiff, dem wir dankten,

ich stand
in dir.[6]

Felstiner helpfully points out the biblical significance of the fig, and of the "standing" of Jerusalem, although he is unclear when he writes "both Hebrew versions say the same"—versions of what? The poem, of course, works better in German. First, the lovely compound words—*Feigensplitter*, *Hellkiefernduft*, *Dänenschiff* (which Felstiner, out of excessive concern with sound, renders as *skiff*). Then the fine alliteration in *d*, culminating in *dir*. Next, the various meanings of *stand* (stood), repeated as a kind of litany cum anaphora, and climaxing in that last *stand*, which, besides its metaphorical meaning, has a literal one: Paul and Ilana seem to have made love in that pine grove.

The four or five kinds of standing take on vivid life. The splinter of fig sensuously adhering to the beloved's mouth; the whole big city of Jerusalem protectively encircling the lovers; the scent of bright green pines in the air that surrounds the earthy surroundings, translating them to a higher, heavenly plane; and, lastly, the lover erect inside the beloved, also in the figurative sense of sheltered, supported in a woman's maternal and sisterly love. Even the generous white spaces between the brief strophes contribute their suggestive power.

But neither Ilana's love nor anything else could keep Celan going. Felstiner quotes from one of the poet's last letters to Ilana, shortly before the suicide: "The doctors have much to answer for, every day is a

6 Felstiner translates: "There stood/ a splinter of fig on your lip,// there stood/ Jerusalem around us,// there stood/ the bright pine scent/ above the Danish skiff we thanked,// I stood/ in you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

burden, what you call 'my own health' is probably never to be, the damage reaches to the core of my experience . . . They've healed me to pieces!' (Man hat mich zerheilt)." That coinage, *zerheilt*, is superb and tragic, whether or not it is strictly true. It is of a piece with the daring language of Celan's poetry and some of his prose. But the prose could also be touchingly simple, as can be seen in the letters to Nelly Sachs, for example. These contain only one remotely "literary" passage, when Paul writes Nelly on May 30, 1958: "All the unanswerable questions in these dark days. This ghostly mute not-yet, this even more ghostly and mute no-longer and once-again, and in between the unforeseeable, even tomorrow, even today." Otherwise, everything in the letters is plain and unconcerned with posthumous publication.

The poetry, however, can be difficult. Felstiner quotes Samuel Beckett: "Celan me dépasse" (Celan is beyond me). Beckett at least is honest. Others, including some of the most vociferous admirers, often misunderstand what they read. Thus Felstiner cites George Steiner's mistaking for Yiddish a Middle High German passage from Meister Eckhart incorporated in a Celan poem. Thus in "Shibboleth," where Celan quotes the rallying cry from the Spanish Civil War, "No pasarán" (though unaccountably omitting the accent), Jacques Derrida perceives a relationship between that slogan and Socratic aporia. Bruno Bettelheim managed to misinterpret the shattering "black milk" of "Todesfuge"—the black ash from the crematoriums imbibed by the as yet living inmates—as "the image of a mother destroying her infant."

Felstiner himself can be on shaky ground. In the poem "Es war Erde in ihnen" ("There was earth inside them"), Celan evokes the Auschwitz inmates digging, endlessly digging. The powerful poem ends, as Felstiner translates, "O you dig and I dig, and I dig through to you,/ and the ring on our finger awakes." He comments: "Now the digging leads to a ring and an awakening: is it the Nibelungs' ring of buried gold? If so, what of the rings pulled from the fingers of Jews about to be slaughtered?" This is all perfectly otiose. Finally Felstiner gets it right: "Celan's ring seals the bond with those who dig." But why didn't he throw out those useless bits of free association?

Never mind, though. He has accomplished what he promised in his subtitle: given us Celan the poet, the survivor, the Jew. Partial survivor only, for the aftereffects of persecution and loss, time-bomblike, induced delayed death by suicide, as they did for others like him. "It is no coincidence," Felstiner writes, "that Jean Améry and Primo Levi also took their own lives. Nor that Celan's loyal friend and brilliant critic, Peter Szondi, another survivor, drowned himself the year after Celan." But incomplete survival in life does not preclude full survival in death. Celan's work lives on undaunted, undented by time. To this survival, Felstiner's book makes its modest but invaluable contribution.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by William Jay Smith, Mark Jarman & David Gelernter*

Lily in autumn

Lily, the golden
Siamese,
walks at night
through the gilded trees.

Gold branches quiver,
moonlight falls:
Lily steps out on
the old stone walls,

glides into the barn,
creeps up to the loft
where the air is sweet
and the hay is soft.

Now there enthroned,
a queen at ease,
sits Lily, the golden
Siamese.

—William Jay Smith

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Prayer for our daughters

May they never be lonely at parties
Or wait for mail from people they haven't written
Or still in middle age ask God for favors
Or forbid their children things they were never forbidden.

May hatred be like a habit they never developed
And can't see the point of, like gambling or heavy drinking.
If they forget themselves, may it be in music
Or the kind of prayer that makes a garden of thinking.

May they enter the coming century
Like swans under a bridge into enchantment
And take with them enough of this century
To assure their grandchildren it really happened.

May they find a place to love, without nostalgia
For some place else that they can never go back to.
And may they find themselves, as we have found them,
Complete at each stage of their lives, each part they add to.

May they be themselves, long after we've stopped watching.
May they return from every kind of suffering
(Except the last, which doesn't bear repeating)
And be themselves again, both blessed and blessing.

—Mark Jarman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Viollet-le-Duc

Blue he said is the light the light is blue.
The glowing points of blue in Christian glass.
If you were forced to live indoors—what if you
liquified the sky stone trees and grass

into a test tube, opened it inside:
might you feel sorry for yourself in there?
Or idly steel your mind bed down and ride
the fragrance? Smoke unraveling in air,

that marks a splintered forest smashed, bound tight
put down on hearth and burnt up: watch the steep
flames' leap of resurrected light!
The pale drunk-making softness, bristling-deep.

The reconstructed sky is cramped but true.
A reconstructed body's like that too.

—*David Gelernter*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

"Rent" subsidy

by Mark Steyn

In May 1985, *Sunday in the Park with George* opened at the Booth, and was hailed as a theatrical breakthrough by the then drama critic of *The New York Times*. Indeed, it was such a breakthrough that it could not be contained by a single review. Week after week, some further significance in the work was discovered and discussed in the paper's arts pages; every Sunday was a *Sunday in the Times with George*; it broke all records as Broadway's longest-running review. The effect was to keep a steady stream of traffic heading to the box-office—not enough for the show to recoup its investment but enough to let it stagger on for a year and catch the eye of the Pulitzer jury, which gave it the prize for 1985. I'm told that at a *Times* editorial meeting shortly afterwards there was consternation that the paper hadn't won a single Pulitzer that year. Someone said: "But we did. For Drama."

The *Times* has just won another Pulitzer Prize in Drama, with the first musical to take the award since *Sunday*. Students of the constantly accelerating trajectory of contemporary celebrity will note that they pulled this one off in a fifth of the time: the *Times* had to work *Sunday* for almost a year; they stitched up the Pulitzer for *Rent* in little more than a month, a month filled with background features on its deceased author's childhood friends and think-pieces pondering from every conceivable angle its ground-breaking qualities. Those of us who thought *Rent* The Rock Opera had a pretty simple-minded narrative have to concede that it's a model of subtle dramatic development compared to *Rent* The Legend: the late Jonathan Larson has been catapulted by the Pulitzer jury from Mildly Promising Contender for a Most Promising Newcomer Award to the same hallowed pantheon as Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, and Tennessee Williams without having to undergo anything as tiresome as a career. The price of fame is low *Rent*.

Does it matter? There have been controversial Pulitzers aplenty: the 1924 jury selected George Kelly's expanded vaudeville sketch, *The Show-Off*, but was overruled by Columbia University, which gave the prize to Hatcher Hughes's *Hell-Bent fer Heaven*, prompting juror resignations and other protests; the 1935 winner, *The Old Maid*, Zoë Akins's lackluster Edith Wharton adaptation, so dismayed the New York drama critics that they determined to set up their own Critics' Circle Awards. In contrast, *Rent*'s victory doesn't seem to be in the least bit controversial. We are told, in almost every puff piece, that it's the *Hair* of the Nineties, but, in just eight weeks, *Rent* pulled off a feat its four-letter predecessor could never have dreamt of. In the Sixties, the theater establishment was not yet so enfeebled that it felt obliged to embrace an incoherent hippy-dippy peace'n'love extravaganza. Richard Rodgers set the tone: at the end of the first act, when the cast for reasons as obscure as the lighting take their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clothes off, he walked out. No one gave *Hair* a Pulitzer. That year, there was a hit play with gay themes (*The Boys in the Band*) and a rock opera adapted from Shakespeare (*Your Own Thing*), but in those days the Pulitzer jury was able to resist such temptations. In 1968, they concluded, as they had in '63, '64, and '66, that no play was worthy of the name. There would have been persuasive arguments for saying the same this year.

Joseph Pulitzer created his Prize in Drama with the intention that it should honor "the original American play performed in New York which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals and good manners." Granted that there's room, as the lawyers say, for a wide latitude of interpretation, it would still be safe to assume that, faced with a group of HIV-positive performance artists, drug addicts, and transvestites raging against the dull conformity of work and business suits and affirming their right to celebrate their lifestyle to the point of self-destruction, Joseph Pulitzer would have reacted exactly as Richard Rodgers did. It is our misfortune that the shade of the late Mr. Pulitzer counts for less than that of the late Mr. Larson, and that these days the movers and shakers of the arts world are more prone to dull conformity than any convention of CPAs, telephone sock-mop salesmen or Wal-Mart checkout clerks.

My attorney, a ferocious show biz lawyer, disagrees: "*Rent* has really energized the season," she said. "It's created this terrific buzz."

"Oh, come on," I scoffed. "Have you seen it?"

"Well, no . . ."

"Do you know anyone who has?"

"Well, no," she said again, and explained that even Bernie Jacobs, the President of the Shubert Organization, had been unable to get in. (My source at the organization tells me that a deal for a Shubert theater fell through because, appropriately, "the producers of *Rent* didn't want to pay any rent.") That's about the only truly "revolutionary" thing about *Rent*: its indifference to the Broadway establishment. The minute the "terrific buzz" started, all the money guys decided they had to see the show if only to be *au courant* at cocktail parties, but the New York Theatre Workshop run was sold out (there's only a couple of hundred seats), and the producers weren't prepared to make room in their tiny playhouse for the uptown big shots at the expense of their loyal downtown crowd.

The Pulitzer is not averse to a little ground-breaking itself. The 1927 Prize in Drama was the first given to a non-Broadway play—*In Abraham's Bosom* by Paul Green; the 1932 prize, the first to a musical —*Of Thee I Sing*; the 1970 prize, the first to an off-Broadway production and the first to a black playwright—*No Place to Be Somebody* by Charles Gordone. And now we have the 1996 prize: the first to be awarded to what was, in effect, a semi-private workshop. At the time the award was announced, *Rent* wasn't even playing: it had closed downtown but not yet transferred to Broadway (where it reopened at the end of April). Down in the East Village, if you'd entered by the wrong door, you could easily have mistaken the auditorium for the set and the audience for the cast—both were groups of rather self-conscious downtown bohemians. I was reminded of the 1984 British miners' strike, when a group of miners' wives formed a "theater collective" and began staging plays about miners' wives to groups of miners' wives. *Rent* is like a football team that wins the championship on the strength of having done a few workouts in front of its own cheerleaders. It's the first blockbuster hit show to do away with the need for an audience.

In this, more than anything, it's a template for the times as well as the *Times*. "The culture" is taking the principles of abstract art to their logical conclusion, to the point where culture itself is becoming abstract: "culture" today is about a terrific buzz, a groove, a vibe, a *Zeitgeist*-of-the-week; it no

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

longer depends on anything as drearily earthbound as a script or a production. To compare the *Times*'s Pulitzer for *Sunday in the Park* with that for *Rent* is to understand the grim ratchet effect. Whatever else may be said, Frank Rich genuinely loved and admired Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's work: one can well imagine Frank at home of an evening slipping his well-worn cast album into his CD player and being transported to rapture. His successors—the paper's chief critics, the ones responsible for arguing the work's merit as a *work*—can muster no such robust enthusiasm for *Rent*. Reading between the lines of the paper's senior voices, we can rest assured that the ostensibly approving music critic of the *Times* is not chucking out excess Mozart or Verdi to make shelf room for the cast album; we know the theater critic would, in his heart of hearts, much rather be at Ibsen or Shaw, or David Mamet or August Wilson. Both notices are characterized by timidity. As was pointed out here in last month's Notes & Comments, the music critic, even in his eagerness to sign on as one of the *Rent* boys, couldn't avoid letting slip that the music wasn't any good, and neither was the book. And, in a musical, what else is left?

Well, there's the hype, which the *Times* critics must have concluded they would be unable to resist. With *Sunday in the Park*, the paper was hyping the show; with *Rent*, it's hyping the hype. America's most prestigious drama award fell for it hook, line, and stinker: the hook is the young author's death; the line is that this show represents the best hope for the future of the American theater; the stinker is the drama itself, which is uniformly complacent in its assumptions and clichéd in the music it chooses to convey them. I reviewed *Rent* The Play here two months ago, and I have no particular quarrel with it. But *Rent* The Phenomenon represents a new low in theatrical desperation, and it has to be challenged. The Pulitzer Prize is supposed to be for drama. Which means it is an award for writing. Which in a musical comes down to three elements: music, lyrics, and book. The music has a couple of affecting tunes but is otherwise a scattershot ragbag of pop pastiche which fails to find an individual voice: it never coheres into a score. The lyrics are disfigured by several technical defects and a tendency to declare, rather than reveal, character. The book has eight separate subplots to cover, but the ersatz rock score is unsuited to storytelling: in a contest restaged every few minutes, the book squares up against a noisy song, and the book loses. In other words, the drama loses. The Pulitzer jury has forgotten what it's supposed to be judging. It is possible to respond to *Rent* because you're sad its author has died, or because the cast members seem for the most part to be playing themselves, or because you'd much rather be at a rock concert than at an intelligible play anyway, or because you agree with what they say about AIDS, or because you like a couple of the songs mainly because they sound like songs you already know. But it is not possible to respond to *Rent* as *drama*.

Rent has one thing going for it: sincerity of performance—which is not to be disdained. So much of what New York theater has to offer is highly glossed "product." It always was, of course, but they used to disguise it better: *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, *Moon over Buffalo*, *Victor/Victoria*, even *Master Class* are all transparently phony. *Rent*, on the other hand, is earnest, and no one wants to be beastly to a bunch of earnest youngsters (or, anyway, earnest young middle-agedsters) singing earnestly about the environment they have chosen to inhabit. This is presumably what the *Times* music man has in mind when he hails *Rent* because it "brims with goodwill" and is "trying painfully to create a more inclusive art."

Inclusive? *Rent* is the very opposite. It represents a further shrinking of the theatrical horizon. It's Mickey-and-Judy-hey-why-don't-we-kids-put-on-a-show-right-here-in-the-barn: hey, let's do a show right here in the East Village for all us East Villagers! But it is, in fact, *exclusive*: it explicitly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

excludes all those dumb schmucks for whom sex and drugs and AIDS raise more complicated issues than the right to rampant self-indulgence. It excludes, in other words, most of America.

I'd always reckoned the Pulitzer must have its fair share of embarrassing awards. But its record, since *Why Marry?* in 1918, is pretty sound. Many of the titles are the ones you'd expect: *Anna Christie*, *Street Scene*, *The Green Pastures*, *Our Town*, *Death of a Salesman*. . . . But even the forgotten ones aren't dishonorable: Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* (1921) is a shrewd, observant Midwestern marriage drama. We'd dismiss it as "dated" now, but it's more honest—or, at any rate, less self-deluding—in its depiction of love in the Midwest in 1921 than *Rent* is about "love" in Lower Manhattan in 1996. I was pleasantly surprised by *Hell-Bent fer Heaven* (1924): it's *Romeo and Juliet* meets *The Hatfields and McCoys*, and, on reflection, relocating the illicit romance to two feuding mountain families seems a fresher transposing than *West Side Story*'s. *Hell-Bent fer Heaven* exemplifies the amended specifications attached to the prize a decade later: after 1934, instead of the morals and manners line, the award was to be given to the play "which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage, dealing preferably with American life."

American *life*: when was the last time you saw that on a New York stage? We have plays about actors (*Moon over Buffalo*, *Jack*), plays about opera singers (*Master Class*), operas about film actors (*Sunset Boulevard*), musicals about drag queens (*Victor/Victoria*), and, week after week, show after show (*Cowgirls*, *Zombie Prom*) that depend not (as *Miss Lulu Bett* did) on their observation of life but on their observation of tacky country bands or Sixties high-school movies or a zillion other aspects of pop culture that aren't worth spoofing. August Wilson, a double Pulitzer winner who would I hope be aghast at the standard of play-making in *Rent*, is a distinguished exception to this myopia. We are familiar on Broadway with the way plays are transformed into song-'n'dance, but Wilson is the first to make the journey in the opposite direction: he takes song'n'dance and makes plays from them. It's Wilson's gift to be able to convert a twelve-bar blues lyric ("Well, I woke up this morning . . .") into dialogue, or an instrumental jazz solo into a rounded character. The "guitars" in the title of his latest play, *Seven Guitars*, are the seven principals, gathered under the looming brick tenement in Pittsburgh in 1948. In Lloyd Richards's production at the Walter Kerr, they are all superbly realized, forming a sort of mood music of Negro culture in the Forties. Characters talk in stories, epigrams, recipes, some like early rhythm'n'blues, others like Andy Razaf novelty songs. One portly droll describes how he juggled seven women: "I tried to move my Friday woman over to Sunday, but she got mad. My Sunday woman quit me and my Monday woman wanted to see me on Saturday. I got so confused I say the best thing for me to do was quit my job."

Seven Guitars is a straight play, but it's more musical than *Rent*. Its characters sing: they're defined by their rhythms, by their vocabulary, by their movements—the sort of thing *musical* theater is supposed to do. Wilson's weakness, as usual, is his plotting: he's not much interested in dramatic propulsion, and hasn't seemed to notice that his two Pulitzer winners, *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, are also the closest he's got to structured "well-made plays." He seems to prefer that you just hang out with his characters and imbibe them for a couple of hours: it's a slice of life, but at least it's *life* and not the dead art-about-art which most plays offer us. As it happens, three of *Seven Guitars*'s characters are musicians and Wilson uses them to make one neat point that no critic seems to think worthy of mention. Floyd Barton and his pals are rhythm'n'bluesmen who've been taken for a ride by a white manager. In the second act, things look up briefly when the boys get a gig at the Blue Goose, where they're due to sing "That's All Right," a song by Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It's Wilson's sly hint at what's about to befall Floyd: Crudup, a black bluesman, is forgotten today, and "That's All Right" is remembered instead as the first ever single by Elvis Presley, the white boy who sang black. Floyd's dreams of pop success are doomed. Wilson's is not an original thesis but it shows more insight into how music impacts our lives—its seductions, its delusions, its compensations—than anything in *Rent*.

The Pulitzer people, though, have always demonstrated a slightly woolly thinking on music. When they gave the 1932 prize to *Of Thee I Sing*, George Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, and the Gershwins' presidential satire, they recognized that a musical could be as dramatic as a play—which is reasonable. But then they decided that the prize itself could only be won by the librettists and lyricist, as only they had written the words wherein the drama is contained—which is ridiculous. If a musical deserves to win an award for drama, it's because the music itself is dramatic. They belatedly came to their senses in time to honor both Hammerstein *and* Rodgers for *South Pacific* in 1950, but even then they were catching up, awarding a prize for R&H's most conventional show rather than its bolder predecessors, *Carousel* and *Oklahoma!* It would be ludicrous to discuss Larson's "score" in the same breath as *South Pacific*: it does not subscribe to the disciplines of drama, but operates merely as a distraction from drama. In its inability to bear the dramatic burden, it belatedly vindicates the jury's decision in 1932. I can't resist pointing out, too, that Rodgers and Hammerstein, America's most successful dramatists, are as thorough a repudiation as possible of every creative writing course's favorite dictum: write what you know. What did these two urban Jews know about the South Pacific or Down East Maine in the nineteenth century or Oklahoma Territory on the brink of statehood? Currently, on Broadway, you can see a half-hearted revival of *The King and I* (at the Neil Simon) and a generic adaptation of their film *State Fair* (at the Music Box): one set in Siam, one in Iowa; one sounding sorta Siamese, one sounding kinda corny Midwestern, but both sounding indubitably, gloriously Rodgers. Larson, in contrast, *did* write what he knew: he wrote about his own life, his own world—but it doesn't sound like his own music, only like everybody else's warmed over.

Perhaps its closest forebear is the 1976 winner, *A Chorus Line*. Like *Rent*, it originated off-Broadway, in a workshop; like *Rent*, it was sparely staged, consisting for the most part of the cast addressing us head-on; like *Rent*, it had a pop-conscious score; like *Rent*, it was about artists—or, at any rate, chorus dancers; and, like *Rent*, it was supposed to be "raw" and "honest" about their lives. It was *A Chorus Line*'s misfortune to run long enough to reveal its raw honesty as the cruelest joke. It was honest about every aspect of the American dance world except the only one that in the end made any difference. One by one, the real-life tragedies of its creators began to outpace anything on stage, until the play's (by now) period charm began to feel increasingly uncomfortable and self-deceiving. The director-choreographer, Michael Bennett, died of AIDS in 1987; the librettist, James Kirkwood, followed two years later; then his co-author, Nicholas Dante; and cast member after cast member. . . . *A Chorus Line* fulfilled its ambition: it became a symbol of American show dance, but in a way its creators could never have foreseen. In essence, *Rent* merely adds the missing topic—disease and death—to *A Chorus Line*'s sentimental and manipulative formula.

Is *Rent* the worst Pulitzer winner ever? Yes. Its form cripples its subject. To get the measure of its failure, you only have to see the two other Pulitzer winners currently on Broadway, one from 1962, the other from 1967, neither from the top rank. *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (at the Richard Rodgers) and *A Delicate Balance* (at the Plymouth) couldn't be more different: one a business satire in a ring-a-ding-ding Sixties vernacular, the other an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

elusive drawing room play in which the characters hover between sanity and madness and speak in stylized, ultra-articulate dialogue ("I apologize that my nature is such as to bring out in you the full force of your brutality"). But their authors—Frank Loesser and Abe Burrows, and Edward Albee—are all men of the theater committed to the integrity of drama in its varied forms. In the last quarter-century, the Pulitzer Prize has had increasing difficulty identifying their successors, if any there be. *No Place to Be Somebody*, in 1970, was much admired at the time: its black characters are a racketeer, a dancer, a whore, and an effeminate and ultimately transvestite playwright; 90 percent of the sentences in the script end in exclamation marks; it is a play to be shouted rather than acted; and its last line is "My black anguish will fall on deaf ears." The Pulitzer Prize has consistently made a fool of itself when it has fallen for fashion hits, for fashion hits are almost always phony: supposedly "angry" statements about society that 98 percent of the audience already agrees with. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, Stephen Sondheim's big number was "Art Isn't Easy." Oh, yeah? Tell it to truck drivers and dairy farmers.

But these days art isn't easy, at least not for the prematurely Pulitzered. The first black playwright to win, Charles Gordone, never wrote another play of any note. Same with Jason Miller, author of *That Championship Season* (1973). After so many disappointments, what could be more irresistible than a Most Promising Newcomer whose inability to fulfill his promise is a given? Jonathan Larson is the theater's answer to Kurt Cobain, the deceased lead singer of Nirvana. Larson wanted to prove that rock music could work in the theater. He didn't. But, with his death, he proved that rock hype does. The Pulitzer has honored heartless comedies, formula musicals, clumsy diatribes, but, even so, *Rent* is an unprecedented disgrace. A "phenomenon," as opposed to a drama, is almost always bogus and destructive. *Hair* was a phenomenon in the sense that a hurricane is: after it has passed through, those who are left have to try and rebuild the community. The tragedy for the American musical is that, after *Hair*, they were never able to. When was the last time you read a mention of *Hair*'s false dawn *except* in a piece about *Rent*? The Seventies movie flopped, the Eighties revival flopped, the Nineties West End revival flopped. It turned on, we tuned in, and then it dropped out: imagine if it were up there with *Death of a Salesman*, *Picnic*, or even *Harvey* eternally rebuking the Pulitzers for succumbing to a fit of the trendies. That's what *Rent* will be doing in a few years' time: its Prize in Drama is an assault on drama; it leads the American theater deeper down the mirrored cul-de-sac of art about art and further and further away from "American life."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

Between Paris & the shtetl: Marc Chagall at the Jewish Museum

by Mario Naves

When I mentioned to friends that I was going to be writing about the painter Marc Chagall (1887–1985), their reaction was, invariably, a rolling of the eyes. This response isn't difficult to understand. If Chagall has not become an embarrassment on the scale of Salvador Dalí, his standing as an artist has fallen considerably. Mention of his name is likely to bring forth images of a Russian-Jewish mythology characterized by a ripe sentimentality and woolly expanses of blue, rose, and pink, the pictorial equivalents of cotton candy. While Chagall's position as a master of early modernist painting remains fundamentally undiminished —the austere and enchanting *Over Vitebsk* (1915–20) is a mainstay of MOMA's permanent collection for good reason—his reputation as a lovable hack has all but superseded it.

So when a volunteer at the Jewish Museum informed me last year that an upcoming Chagall exhibition was going to be "a blockbuster" I feared the worst. Not just because I felt that Chagall's *oeuvre* couldn't withstand such an exhibition, but because such exhibitions are often dubious enterprises in themselves. While the blockbuster does make for good museum PR and better box office, whether it provides the best environment—or even *an* environment—for looking at art is debatable. Peering over the heads of a half-dozen gallery-goers for a glimpse at a painting does not, after all, make for an ideal aesthetic experience, especially when the viewer is faced with the prospect of 399 more such "experiences." Artists, even our greatest ones, are not necessarily well served by the format: Miró squeaked by in a blockbuster that made his contribution to twentieth-century art seem less vital than it is. Matisse, being Matisse, survived such a rigamarole, but how possibly could a smaller talent like Marc Chagall?

As it turns out, "Marc Chagall 1907–1917" isn't *enough* of a blockbuster.[1] It focuses on the early years of the artist's development, when the young Russian was working at the top of his form, and Chagall, at his best, is a substantial talent indeed. The exhibition at the Jewish Museum is based on one that appeared at the Kunstmuseum Berne last winter and comprises over a hundred works, about half the number seen in the Swiss show. Such a diminution is bound to have profound consequences for an exhibition, but even viewers not apprised of this information will find the New York show sketchy. "Chagall 1907–1917" ends abruptly just as it is beginning to find its own rhythm. Judging from the catalogue, the

1 "Marc Chagall 1907–1917" opened at the Jewish Museum, New York, on March 31, 1996, and remains on view through August 4. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Toni Stoos, Sandor Kuthy, and Meret Meyer, has been published by the Kunstmuseum Berne, Switzerland (208 pages, $35 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Swiss exhibition was not only bigger but richer, including several key Chagall paintings not in the New York show. It should be emphasized, however, that the show at the Jewish Museum is far from bad. While it is too modest in scale and scope to qualify as a blockbuster, "Chagall 1907–1917" is, nevertheless, a happy event.

The exhibit begins with Chagall in Russia, where the signature elements of his style begin to bud. Born in Vitebsk, a rural town in White Russia, he was the eldest of nine children of a Hasidic family. Because of the traditional Jewish suspicion of representation, Chagall's interest in the visual arts drew both disapproval and consternation from his mother and father. But his resolve must have been formidable, for it was in 1908 that he entered the Svantseva School in St. Petersburg, then under the direction of Leon Bakst.

Two years later Chagall made his first trip to Paris, a four-year stay that came as a revelation to the young painter. His valentine to the city, *Paris Through the Window* (1913), not included here, is one of the signal images of modern art. It was there that Chagall traveled in the company of some of the most notable figures in twentieth-century art. Among his friends and acquaintances were Guillaume Apollinaire, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Jean Metzinger, Sergei Diaghilev, Roger de La Fresnaye, and Fernand Léger. Such company, one feels, motivated (and disciplined) Chagall, and if his art remains unclassifiable its influences are not undetectable. He borrowed from Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, and the Delaunays' Orphism without becoming an adherent to any one style; Chagall spent not a little time in the Louvre as well. In *My Life* he wrote, "Have you ever heard of traditions, of Aix, of the painter with his ear cut off, of cubes, of squares, of Paris? Vitebsk, I'm deserting you." The heady enthusiasm in Chagall's rushing flow of words is infectious, and it's there to see in "Chagall 1907–1917."

If Chagall left Russia physically to live in Paris, he never did so emotionally or spiritually: Vitebsk figures in much of the work he created in France. His distance from family and Bella Rosenfeld, who would eventually become his wife, undoubtedly fed his fondness for his home town. Indeed, Chagall's sense of self was so rooted there that he would come to consider Paris his "second Vitebsk." This may sound like the mooning of a romantic and homesick artist. Yet looking at *Over Vitebsk* or *The Flying Carriage* (1913), one gets such a particular feeling of the place—where magical events are as prosaic as milking the cow—that it's impossible not to feel bewitched by them. Chagall is the rare sophisticate who manages to tap into the emotional sturdiness of folk culture without belittling or, at least in these paintings, over-sentimentalizing it. As an artist he was a product of both modernist Paris and the *shtetl*, a hybrid of the urban and the rural, the new and the old. This is what makes his best work compassionately earthy and utterly fantastic. It is what makes Chagall Chagall.

Over half of "Chagall 1907–1917" is made up of works on paper—small scale watercolors, ink drawings, and gouaches. This may be due to space limitations, but more likely to the reluctance of museums and private collectors to loan their Chagall paintings. It is, of course, understandable: paintings aren't only fragile, they can also be personal and public treasures. This emphasis on works on paper, however, gives "Chagall 1907–1917" an informal tone that is to its benefit. It is fascinating to watch an artist work things out on paper or often just play—three scratchy ink drawings from 1907, depicting the artist in his bedroom, are irresistible. True, the gouache studies for some of his better known paintings feel like stand-ins for the real thing; but, as the exhibition reveals, Chagall was a natural with gouache, its fluidity suited to small scale spontaneity and a style that depended on drawing. So if important paintings are missed—I would have liked to have seen the Philadelphia Museum's *Poet or Half Past*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Three (1911) and the Stedelijk Museum's *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* (1912–13) included here—it doesn't detract from the very real merits of the works on paper. Besides, I'm not convinced that the gouache *Study for Paris Through the Window* (1913), with its delicate dappling of purples, whites, and blues, isn't a better work of art than the oil painting based on it.

There are also some fine paintings to be seen here. New Yorkers will be pleased to reacquaint themselves with MOMA's *Over Vitebsk* and *Birthday* (1915), the Guggenheim's *Soldier Drinks* (1911–12), and the Met's malleable *Market Place, Vitebsk* (1917). *Self-Portrait with White Collar* (1914) is striking and serious, and *Behind the House* (1917) is wistful, the painting of a man who has been inside for far too long and is pining to get out. *The Poet Reclining* (1915) depicts the artist uncomfortably ensconced at the bottom of the composition, decidedly at odds with the painting's pastoral farm setting. Yet its total effect is lyrical and haunting. At first glance, *Festival Day (Rabbi with Etrog)* (1914) appears to be a comic account of the rigors of conscience, but its icy light and piercing pinks and purples turn it, instead, into a rather severe depiction of spiritual crisis. *Festival Day* has a gravity that would have been the envy of Max Beckmann.

Not all of the paintings are as good as these, however, and if Chagall proved to be innately adept at gouache, his skill with oils came only with perseverance. In some of the early paintings, like *Father* (1910–11) and *The Wedding* (1911), the paint sits on the surface of the canvas lumpishly; in these works, anyway, Chagall's color sense is patchy, unformed. When Chagall explores the facture of modernist brushwork and composition, his enthusiasm is real, but the resulting paintings can be contrived. The Cubist-influenced division of space in *Cavalry* (1912), for instance, is an imposition on the image rather than an integral part of it, and the same is true for the soldier's face in the otherwise laudable *The Soldier Drinks*. And when Chagall creates a broken field of green, white, yellow, and red brushstrokes, as in the bottom right of *The Flying Carriage*, he really isn't painting; he's just letting us know how much he loves the Fauvist pictures he's probably just seen.

Much of the beautiful painting to be seen in these pictures occurs when Chagall lightens up on the Cubism and handles oils in a manner closer to Rembrandt than to any "wild beast." One sees this in *The Lovers in Gray* (1916–17), a portrait of the artist lying in the crook of Bella's arm. It is a clunky painting, the figures' almost Egyptian rigidity is awkward and the intimations of tenderness unconvincing. (Check out the joyous *The Birthday*, hung nearby, for a telling comparison.) But here Chagall's Cubist devices are subdued and become his own. The soft planar divisions of Bella's red blouse sit within the image rather than on top of it, and the painterly passage that travels from her blouse to its patterned collar through to Bella's neck, with its modulations of velvety roses, pinkish grays, and chalky whites, is breathtaking.

Bella with White Collar (1917) is another curious picture with masterly paint-handling. It's a vertical canvas with Bella, towering over the top two-thirds of the image like a veritable King Kong, posing behind a forest wherein a miniature Chagall walks their baby daughter, Ida. The strangeness of the image may derive from the fact that the portrait of Bella was based on a photograph while the remainder of the image came from Chagall's imagination. On the whole it's a lopsided picture, and an extraordinary one. For it is the self-portrait with his daughter that is the emotional hub of the painting. Chagall's forest is a fluctuating and droll invention—a landscape that conjures the surrealist bumptiousness of Miró with the cartoon whimsy of Dr. Seuss—and the depiction of himself and Ida is suffused with gentleness, captured in understated brushwork and expressive off-whites, light greens, and dry pinks. (Chagall was often at his warmest when his colors were at their coolest.) As installed in the Jewish Museum,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one has to squat in front of *Bella with White Collar* to really savor this section of the image, but any back pain incurred because of it is warranted. The bottom third of *Bella with White Collar* is as sublime a bit of painting as one is likely to find in the modernist canon.

On a subsequent trip to the Jewish Museum to visit "Chagall 1907–1917," my cavils about the size and scope of the exhibition seemed niggling. Why fault an exhibition of terrific pictures, especially one that is as sensitively installed and as welcome as this one? "Chagall 1907–1917" isn't as definitive as the splendid "Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater" seen at the Guggenheim SoHo in 1992, and I still would have liked to have seen the Berne show. But it displays the charms of Chagall's singular genius to good effect and should do much to restore his reputation. There is much to delight over in "Chagall 1907–1917"; it shouldn't be missed.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

"Picasso & Portraiture" at MOMA *by Hilton Kramer*
The maxims of La Rochefoucauld *by Joseph Epstein*
Bernard Lewis's "Middle East" *by Alain Silvera*
Women & politics: Madame de Genlis *by Renee Winegarten*
Jan Steen at the National Gallery *by Karen Wilkin*
"Collabo" writers in wartime France *by Jim Tuck*
The Ashcan artists' New York *by Mario Naves*
New Poems *by Dana Gioia, Floyd Skloot & James Richardson*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

New performances of Schumann

by James F. Penrose

On the afternoon of February 27, 1854, a babbling Robert Schumann ran past the tollkeeper on the *Rathaus Ufer* bridge in Düsseldorf, paused to take final instructions from the whispering voices that had ordered him there, and threw himself into the icy Rhine. After parting with his sanity in this spectacular fashion, he never composed another significant work. His wife, Clara, who spent the rest of her days as mournful high priestess of *Schumanns Werke*, visited him but once during his confinement, the day before he died.

Schumann had always lived close to the edge. The psychiatrist Peter Ostwald has noted that even as a young teen, Schumann had begun to show the symptoms of social withdrawal, loss of contact with peers, and hints of autistic reverie. The penchant for self-destruction might itself have been a Schumann genotype—his grandfather's cousin disposed of himself in 1817 and, in suitably prophetic fashion, Schumann's sister, Emilie, drowned herself when Robert was an impressionable fifteen. This event, coupled with the sudden death of his father some months later, nudged the naturally depressive youth into the shadows of his first severe depression. Other consequences followed; not too long afterward, Schumann began a long-simmering infatuation with Agnes Carus, the local asylum keeper's wife, whom he frequently visited *in situ*. More ominously, he allowed his own interior world to become the forum for certain internal arguments and discussions, often with multiple participants.

Schumann achieved his first true fame as a music critic. An eccentric contributor to the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* and later the editor of his own journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, he adopted a technique that would surface in his compositions at least as effectively as it did in his criticism: the expression of artistic ideals through the voices of an imaginary cohort of like-minded souls. The most famous of these ghostly comrades were the outspoken Florestan and the reticent Eusebius. Schumann inherited the idea for this device from the tortuous theorist of Romanticism Jean-Paul Richter and the hardly less involved E. T. A. Hoffman.

Like the ventriloquist who speaks through his little wooden friends, Schumann considered Florestan and his other inner voices to be different aspects of his own personality. These days, network television has lent us an easy familiarity with the psychiatric terrors associated with inner voices (usually in the context of serial killings). While we may fidget at the thought of being in the thrall of any sort of inner voice, let alone multiple ones, those inhabiting Schumann's persona were of a gentler sort, better mannered. Of course, those voices and their attendant personalities ultimately overstayed their welcome—thus the incident at the *Rathaus Ufer*. But while their host had the upper hand, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dialogue among the members of that little band was occasionally jolly, more often haunting, and, as time went on, increasingly profound. Florestan and Eusebius made their transformation from literary to musical existence in the marvelously extroverted *Carnaval*, op. 9 (1835), a series of twenty-two tonally affiliated portraits. Here, Schumann gives his evanescent friends something approaching flesh-and-blood company when he included musical sketches of Chopin and Paganini. He also included a curious episode entitled "Sphinxes" in which the music is imaginary; nothing is played—the "notes" are restlike notations in the bass clef (though certain pianists, notably Mitsuko Uchida, sound them out).

By 1836, the fateful year in which he proposed to the prodigy Clara Wieck, Schumann had acquired the pianistic and compositional palette that was to identify him as perhaps the figurehead Romantic. In the tumultuous four years during which he was trying to wrest Clara, seventeen, from her equally determined (and forceful, articulate, and shameless) father, Schumann produced a series of fabulous works for the piano, many of which were written in flashes of surpassing creativity. Several of these contain more than passing hints of Schumann's darker side. The most startling example is the *Nachstücke*, op. 23 (1839). Originally called the *Liechenfantaisie* ("Corpse Fantasy"), it was retitled only after Clara persuaded Robert that such a downbeat name was unlikely to do much for sales. While not all of Schumann's output from this period is as despondently freighted, depression lurks in varying degrees in the *Davidsbündlertänze*, op. 6 (1837), the *Kreisleriana*, op. 16 (1838), and the *Arabeske*, op. 18 (1839). These three pieces, as well as the rarely performed *Toccata*, op. 7 (revised 1833) were featured in recent programs by the young Russian pianist, Evgeny Kissin, and the Rumanian, Radu Lupu.[1] The works' psychological elements were given full rein in compelling and occasionally disturbing performances.

Each of these pianists is something of a legend. Though Radu Lupu, a pupil of the late, renowned Heinrich Neuhaus at the Moscow Conservatory, won three major piano competitions in his youth, he is far removed from being a mere traveling virtuoso. A reticent and physically unprepossessing man whose photograph in the program bears a startling resemblance to Rasputin, Mr. Lupu drew a full house on an unpleasantly cold February evening with his program of Schumann (Sonata in A minor, D. 845, and several encores) and Schubert. Mr. Lupu plays while seated in a chair with a reclining back and his posture is one of utmost relaxation; all the more surprising then to hear the considerable volumes he can produce with minimal display. His style of playing, as one would expect of a pupil of Neuhaus (from whom Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter also sprang), is quietly thoughtful, technically finished and utterly deferential to the music. While the term suffers from overuse, "pianist's pianist" is as fitting as any for Mr. Lupu.

Mr. Kissin is a different story. Though spared the trial-by-combat ordeal of piano competition, his first appearances in the United States were accompanied by a degree of promotional vulgarity normally reserved for razor blades or four-wheel drive cars. Perhaps it was this turbo-hype that prompted Bernard Holland of *The New York Times* to write his remarkably prissy review of Mr. Kissin's program that evening. In the event, however, Mr. Kissin showed himself a wonderful musician (*contra* Mr. Holland)—as well as technician—in performances of works by Bach–Busoni, Mozart, and Schumann. For once, the reality lived up to the hype.

But back to Schumann. Radu Lupu began his program with Schumann's mildly obsessive *Arabeske*, op. 18. Having dedicated it (along with the *Blumenstück*, op. 19) to Frau

1 Evgeny Kissin appeared at Carnegie Hall, New York, on January 19, 1996, and programmed works by Bach–Busoni, Mozart, and Schumann. Radu Lupu appeared at Carnegie Hall on February 9, 1996.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Majorin F. Serre, Schumann quickly tired of the piece, claiming that it was "feeble and for women." These sentiments were lost on Mr. Lupu, who played the *Arabeske* with verve: somewhat faster than usual and with good, clean left-hand work underlying his songlike treatment in the right. In other words, lyrical without being sentimental.

The fictive Davidsbund ("David's Band") was dear indeed to Schumann. It was first mentioned by name in *Der Komet* in 1833, though its members had appeared individually two years previously in his famous essay on Chopin ("Hats off, gentlemen—a genius!"). In his *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, Schumann wrote that the Bund was formed to "do something to improve [the state of music in Germany], to restore the poetry of art to its rightful place of honor"—in the process wresting public fascination back from Rossini and Donizetti and the pianists Henri Herz and Franz Hunten (who, in Schumann's view, presided over progressively lower circles of aesthetic Hell). In fact, this artistic campaign was entirely personal, as its foot soldiers were, of course, Florestan and Eusebius, Schumann's primary alter egos.

The English critic J. A. Fuller-Maitland once noted Schumann's reluctance "not to reveal to the world at large the literary or other sources of his inspiration" and much scholarly thought has been expended on tracing the pedigrees of Florestan and Eusebius, with indifferent result. Robert and Clara became engaged on St. Eusebius's Day—August 14. That particular Eusebius is remembered for his proclamation that there is "nothing that can be invented that is so absurd or monstrous that has not already been said by the philosophers." While this sentiment is more cynical than Schumannesque, it's a closer match than the other five Eusebii that populate the Church calendar. Florestan's origins are even more obscure, and there appear to be few parallels except to the boisterous side of Schumann's own personality.

Schumann's characteristic entwining of artistic principles with personal fantasies is immediately apparent. Written in commemoration of his engagement, the *Davidsbündlertänze* was, as Schumann wrote, a "celebration on the evening of a wedding." That must have been some party—particularly as he later wrote that the eighteen episodes were "dances of death, St. Vitus dances, dances of the Graces and goblins." In many of his works of this period, Schumann used the dance, or the masked ball motif where various characters appeared and reappeared: the *Papillons*, *Carnaval*, and the *Davidsbündlertänze* show the composer's increasing aptitude in transforming personalities to music.

The first edition of the *Davidsbündlertänze* shows how far Schumann indulges his whimsies. Things start on the title page with a bizarre *nom de plume*: the composer(s) are listed as "Florestan and Eusebius"—Schumann's own name does not appear. The outside world briefly intervenes with the work's theme, inscribed "Motto von C. W."—acknowledging its origin from a mazurka of Clara Wieck's (her Opus 6 as well). The work divides into halves, one for each "composer," and Schumann pursues the dualist theme even further by ascribing each miniature to either "F.," "E.," or "F. *und* E." (One scholar has noted that the constituent keys of each of these "Eusebius" and "Florestan" halves resolves to C—for Clara.) Though the composer later removed these attributions and made other material changes to the music, the *Davidsbündlertänze* remain Schumann's most autobiographical work.

Mr. Lupu performed Schumann's reworking of the 1837 original. While scrupulously attentive, Mr. Lupu's playing was anything but standard; his reading showed a thorough understanding of the weirdnesses of the piece. Schumann's expressive indications suggest the underlying mood of each component of the cycle. Part of the enjoyment of hearing this pianist is observing the interpretative subtleties which embody the viceroy's motto: I obey but I do not com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ply. Thus, the opening *Lebhaft* ("Lively") was not so much quick as slithery; *Einfach*, the fifth episode, was, as indicated, simple—but chilling, too—and the next *Einfach* (number eleven) was pensive and still.

The great structural feature of the work, however, is the thematic linkage between the second episode headed *Innig* ("Inmost") and the penultimate *Wie aus der Ferne* ("As from a Distance"). Here, Mr. Lupu's conception was quite captivating. The *Innig* theme was shown as a dreamy reverie, abruptly dissolving under the gruff and bumptious *Mit Humor* chasing on its heels; when the theme returned at the end of the work, though, the dreaminess had turned deathly cold, and with the anguished arch of chords that closed the episode, the audience collectively exhaled as though it had just observed some terrible, but unstoppable, spectacle. While this deeply pessimistic music was leavened with philosophical humor and poignant melody, there was nothing about Mr. Lupu's interpretation that suggested that he was anything but intimate with the darker emotions on which this haunted masterpiece is built.

"A musical portrait of violence and madness" is how Peter Ostwald describes the *Kreisleriana*. Composed in just four days, this hallucinogenic work vies with the C-major *Phantasie* as Schumann's greatest solo composition. As with the *Carnaval* and the *Davidsbündlertänze*, the constituent parts of the *Kreisleriana* are linked emotionally and tonally, rather than structurally. Unlike those other works, Schumann gave few hints—except that the work showed his "savage love" for Clara—of the work's inspiration.

The *Kreisleriana* also suggests a duality with its use of G minor (and related keys) for many of the wilder sections, contrasted with the B-flat coolness of the more reflective episodes. However, this is not an inflexible rule as occasionally a key breaks rank—for example, in the coda of the *Sehr rasch* seventh episode, the tumbling rhythm transforms into B flat. Schumann's writing shows grotesquerie in one of its most advanced forms; even now, Schumann's sense of the weird and spectral is unsettling, in the 1830s its effect must have been almost intolerable. The work is a veritable catalogue of agitation, and the swings from tension to relaxation and back again make its interpretation one of the more demanding feats expected of a pianist. Evgeny Kissin, however, has certainly taken its measure.

In Mr. Kissin's interpretation, the audience seemed to be witnessing the musical depiction of an intelligence succumbing to the forces of irrationality. In the opening *Ausserst bewegt* ("Agitatissimo"), Mr. Kissin revealed the lovely *cantabile* theme to have a calculated, hysterical edge. The third episode, *Sehr aufgeregt*, featured the work's most distraught emotions. Mr. Kissin developed the episode's various voices, weaving them together through its concluding harmonies, leaving a thoroughly unsettled audience. More was to come. The *Sehr lebhaft* fifth section was ghostly, and the following *Sehr langsam* gave one the sense of awakening after a night of heavy drinking, with the dread that one had behaved very badly but not remembering what was done. It was the last episode, however, marked *Schnell und spielend*, that offered the most disquieting playing of the evening, with its introductory, gushing torrent, later quietly replaced with the halting left-hand cadence and weirdly repetitive patterns of the Kreisler theme. Even this audience, ready to applaud at the drop of a name, hesitated a little after hearing this truly creepy conclusion to one of the great, psychotic works of Western art.

The monumental *Toccata* followed, and few of us have had wilder or faster rides. This was the work that Schumann devised as his entrée to the ranks of the great nineteenth-century virtuosi before he ruined his right ring finger. The perfect double-note and octave technique required to play the work at *normal* speed generates enormous heat and fatigue—it's like running three quarters of a mile at a full sprint. Mr. Kissin played it *unbelievably* quickly—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

perhaps Josef Lhévinne could have matched Mr. Kissin for velocity, but the thunderous force of his playing was in a class by itself. The punched chords ending the work were like shotgun blasts, and the well-lathered audience shrieked and carried on in noisy thanks.

During one of his fifteen curtain calls, Mr. Kissin played Liszt's transcription of *Widmung* ("Dedication"), the first song from Schumann's *Myrthen* cycle (op. 25). Though Schumann's setting is not well adapted for the voice, *Widmung* is one of Liszt's loveliest transcriptions (and one not utterly inaccessible to the workaday pianist). Mr. Kissin's treatment of *Widmung*'s climax, an extended double trill lightening in texture and accelerating in effect until the work seemed airborne, was deliriously pretty.

Following his marriage in 1840, Schumann's compositions became progressively less piano-centered. Songs, chamber works, choruses, and symphonies increasingly occupied him, and those flights of imaginative fancy that informed the great works of his courtship evolved into other expressive devices. It was, however, in the *Papillons*, the *Abegg Variations*, *Kinderszenen*, *Carnaval*, and the works under review (all products of this too brief period) where Schumann found the voice—or voices—that speak to us today. Although the individual accents of Chiarina, Florestan, and Eusebius may initially be unfamiliar, we nonetheless sense that Schumann—while perhaps not our first choice as a composer of amusing or pleasurable music—is certainly in the first rank of those who are listened to for spiritual depth.

An afterword: a young freshman at Julliard, Yi Fei Hu, performed an ambitious program of Robert Schumann's C-major *Phantasie* and Franz Liszt's *Sonata* in B minor at the Julliard School, New York, on Saturday, March 23. Mr. Hu appears to have a taste for large-scale works such as these, and certainly possesses the requisite technique. While matters such as stage presence and voicing require attention, Mr. Hu shows considerable promise.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The media

Some heroes of our time

by James Bowman

Recently, I was attacked in *The Washington Post* by Martha Bayles for sneering, in my elitist, *New Criterion*ish way, at those who would claim any artistic value for TV dramas such as "ER." Miss Bayles's counterexample was a recent episode of that same program (the top-rated series on television) in which its hero (George Clooney), an emergency room physician with depressive tendencies who guiltily smokes marijuana and sleeps with women he doesn't care about, rescues a boy from drowning in a culvert. Or hypothermia. Or possibly both.

> In an extraordinary hour of televison [writes Miss Bayles], he rescues and resuscitates the boy. And he does so in a way that is dramatically consistent with his obviously flawed character—thereby putting a human face on at least six of the virtues celebrated in [William] Bennett's *Book of Virtues*: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, courage, perseverance and faith. Plus a couple that (for some reason) never made it into the book: modesty and humility.

I like that parenthetical "for some reason." Very droll. But I don't understand what is supposed to be "extraordinary" about the story. Flawed characters on TV who rescue boys from drowning, or some other grim fate, are as plentiful as blackberries in August.

Even more strange is Miss Bayles's apparent belief that the doctor's decision to rescue the youth, as opposed to fleeing the scene, is in itself a sufficient refutation of Bennett's characterization of prime-time television as home to "self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement, instant gratification." It would seem to me that a person might be pretty far gone in his commitment to all three of those moral failings and still have a hard time consigning a child to a watery grave. It is to take nothing away from the admirable doctor's deed of charity to point out that it does not quite amount to heroism on the Victorian scale. In those days they would have expected him to pay with his life, or at least his health, in order to save the other's life. That we are sure to see him back at the old stand next week, screwing and smoking and making a comfortable living as he wrestles with some new depression, deprives his act of some of its exemplary quality.

But then I suppose we must make do with what we can get—which is rather the point. Popular culture, as Miss Bayles tells us, is not to be compared with high culture but with other popular culture. Just so. To use the language of elitist criticism, our popular culture is banal and pretentious in the same way that Victorian popular culture was sentimental and melodramatic. Maybe we should be grateful that ours still bothers to teach any moral lesson at all. Miss Bayles certainly thinks so. But that doesn't mean that we should be blind to the dessicated and denatured morality that is left to us to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

admire in our rather feeble heroes. They are not really heroes anyway but more closely akin to the celebrities who play them.

That is to say, celebrities are people whose quotidian existences make a claim on our attention not because of anything good or noble that they have done but simply because they have star power. The question of whether or not the doctor smokes his marijuana cigarette, like the question of whether or not George Clooney, who portrays him, will make another movie this year, is not a matter of very much intrinsic interest. Yet lots and lots of people are utterly fascinated and full of curiosity about how both questions will be answered. Why this should be so is one of the mysteries of the age—like why the Victorians were so fascinated by death and disease. But it marks both the character and the actor who plays him as belonging to the celebrity culture. It is not part of the purpose of celebrity culture to furnish us with improving moral examples. Goodbye heroes, hello celebrities.

Of course I don't deny that television teaches; my point was only to doubt that its teachings belong in the aesthetic big leagues, as it was claimed they do by Charles McGrath of *The New York Times Book Review*. If it is social utility of the sort demanded by both Mr. Bennett and Miss Bayles that you want, I admit that popular culture has it over high culture every time. And, although I incline to Bennett's view that the social utility of Victorian moralizing was greater than that of our own, I also see the point of an argument which says that our sort of banal televisual heroes are to be preferred, in a fragmented, volatile and dangerous world, to the melodramatic ones favored by the confident, expansive, and imperial Victorians. This, I believe, is the point of a brief but brilliant essay by Dan Jacobson in the most recent number of the excellent British quarterly *Granta*, which was devoted to the theme of "News."

Jacobson's essay is called "TV is Good for You" and makes a persuasive case that at least a part of the explanation for what Francis Fukuyama calls "The End of History" in those remaining pockets of nineteenth-century ideology—the former Soviet Union and South Africa under apartheid—was "television hunger." It was not only the subject peoples but their rulers who found themselves excluded from the global village.

> Debarred from participating as viewers and actors in the global electronic carnival, they can be roused first to disappointment and anger and then to action. Once they have won their battle, it is true that they are likely to become just like the rest of us. In fact one of the symptoms of their condition is their extreme longing to become like the rest of us.

To a greater or lesser extent, this has also been true of Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat, both of whom paid with their lives for becoming international celebrities, and of Yasser Arafat and Gerry Adams.

> Of course these leaders had loftier ends in mind: the ones they avowed in their speeches and in the documents they signed. But the prospect of being taken into the embrace of television and put on universal display—not as a villain or a suffering creature but as a star—can for them become an important political end. The ambition they nourish is not just their own. The people they represent have gone through a parallel experience of exclusion, of being regarded by the world at large as one of its special, no hope cases. They too have suffered too long from the hunger their leaders are trying to satisfy on their behalf.

It may not be an intrinsically finer thing to be a star than to be a hero, but it is stardom and not heroism which is on offer from our media culture.

It is a good idea to bear this in mind when we consider the latest in the continuing saga of the rocky relations between politicians and press in our own country. To the annual gathering of the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association at a dinner traditionally attended by the president and other political bigwigs this year came the radio

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

host Don Imus. Imus proclaimed to anyone who would listen that his honor as a radio commentator was inconsistent with decorous behavior in front of the powerful who had invited him. "What would you people think of me," he asked his radio audience the next day, "if I shot my mouth off here for 20 years and then went down there and kissed their [expletive]. You wouldn't listen to the radio and I wouldn't blame you." The bracketed "expletive" for (presumably) the naughty word "ass" is courtesy of *The Washington Post*, by the way. Later, Imus told his radio audience that he had "wimped out" at the dinner by giving a too watered down version of the monologue. "Where were the Vince Foster jokes?" asked his producer, Bernard McGuirk.

Accordingly, he very indelicately made reference to Mrs. Clinton's involvement in the Whitewater scandal and to President Clinton's reputation for sexual infidelity, besides, as *The New York Times* rather prissily put it,

> insulting references to Speaker Newt Gingrich's lesbian half sister, the NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw's slight speech impediment, Senator Bob Kerrey's "wooden leg," Senator Joseph Biden's hair transplant, and vulgar allusions to the marital difficulties of several of the television people in the room.

All this seemed to infuriate the radio and television correspondents even more than it did the politicians. Cokie Roberts of ABC announced in a huff that she would never appear as a guest on the Imus show again. The president of the correspondents' association wrote a letter of apology to President and Mrs. Clinton.

It seemed to me, however, that there was some ambivalence about this reaction. On the one hand, being rude about the president in his very presence at a dinner where he is your guest might be considered by traditionalists to be *lèse majesté*; on the other hand, it is a way of affirming one's fellowship with him in the celebrities' club—a fellowship which this president, in particular, has often seemed eager to extend. Nor was Imus's performance, said to be "over the line," altogether inconsistent with the purpose of the occasion. As Andrew Ferguson wrote in *The Weekly Standard*:

> Like a mass, a press dinner is a reenactment, and as with a mass its purpose is to reaffirm fundamental beliefs about the way the world works. A religious ritual conjures from chaos the proof that God's in His heaven and all's right with the world. A Washington press dinner shows who's boss.

I don't know that the orthodox would agree with that description of the Mass, but Ferguson is certainly on to something when he sees these occasions in terms of ritual sacrifice. The trouble is that, unlike the Mass, the press dinner is still close enough to real sacrifice that occasionally it looks as if the priest's knife may slip. That is what happened with Don Imus. But in fact the fear was unfounded, the likelihood of his doing any real harm remote.

Ferguson is one of those who believes that presidents should just say no to the indignities they are invited to submit to and to make the whole nasty business go away. I am inclined to fear that the cult of celebrity—in which both press and politicians are complicit but about which neither can do very much—has made it all but impossible for us ever again to elect a president who is unwilling to submit to answering questions about his underwear on MTV. Certainly it did not bode well that Bob Dole allowed himself to be photographed in his bathing trunks and a T-shirt when he was on vacation in Florida immediately after clinching the Republican presidential nomination. Journalists sometimes like to protest about such things, as Maureen Dowd did in *The New York Times*, but that is just part of the process of ritual humiliation. Ooh! Who wants to see your white, puckered old body? Of course the answer is: We do! Like the press dinner, it shows us who's boss. And the boss is not the press. It's John Q.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Public, whose pitiful compensation this is for giving up in such large measure his independence and his fortune to the state.

What's in it for the politicians and the press is not just power, but the sense that it is made legitimate because it is shared and monitored by such a bunch of regular guys. Just over a week after the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner, the Gridiron Club for print journalists held *its* let-your-hair-down dinner—only this one is even more let-your-hair-down because it is off the record. The reporters from the *The Washington Post*'s Style section, Laura Blumenfeld and Dana Hull, wrote (April 1) of their confusion:

> Behind the green gauze curtains, inside the Presidential Ballroom, Republicans, Democrats and journalists, too, swirled on vapors of wine, appearing to be great friends, all of the same circle. No one was in character; the antagonistic poses were gone. It was like sneaking backstage and making a sickening discovery about the actors: Snow White is obnoxious, the evil queen is a mousy bore, and in real life they take yoga class together.

The authors then list four "Shocking Truths" such as that "they like each other" or "Washington isn't funny" (or, most shocking of all, that the president actually did find the Gridiron skits funny)—though their tongue-in-cheek method of setting them out indicates clearly enough that they do not regard them as shocking at all. They pretend to be shocked as a way of presenting to the insiders who read the Style section the knowing, the unshockable nature of their own attachment to the same celebrity "circle."

Between these two Washington rituals, this year, there came the Oscars. Last year, David Letterman acted as master of ceremonies and was criticized, like Don Imus, for going a little "over the line." Not that Letterman engaged in anything so crude or tasteless as making fun of people's sexual or financial peccadilloes. But Hollywood egos are even more fragile than Washington ones, and Letterman's mild, New York-style irreverence toward celebrity in the town that invented it was not appreciated. Making fun of exotic names like "Uma" and "Oprah" or twitting Tom Hanks by asking if it would have killed him to have worn a tie—these things are as much *lèse majesté* in their world as hinting, to their faces, that the president is a philanderer and the first lady a crook.

So this year's hostess, Whoopi Goldberg, confined herself to a much more tastefully Hollywoodish presentation. It's true that she and others did venture some barbs at those not present, including Jesse Jackson and the entire Republican primary field (stabbing people in the back is more the Hollywood way), but mostly the Oscars were about feeling good—not only about the beautiful people we turned out in numbers second only to the Super Bowl's to watch but also about ourselves. Thus it was rather a jarring note struck by Christopher Hitchens when he wrote a typically outrageous piece for *The Washington Post* deploring the bit of the telecast in which poor, paralyzed Christopher Reeve was wheeled out on stage to plead for more social consciousness from Hollywood film makers.

It's not that Hitchens is against social consciousness—though the banality and simple-mindedness of most Hollywood politics is unlikely to satisfy his curious brand of left-wingery. It's that he is the only man in America who thinks it worth his while to regret that the pig produces fat or the maple produces sap or Hollywood produces cheap sentiment.

> We are on our guard against overdone sentimentality [he writes], just as we are against politicians who resort to easy applause lines. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences should not celebrate the finest in acting and filmmaking by going for low laughter and inexpensive tears. The idea of catharsis represents the ancient and noble idea that emotions can be summoned by drama and tragedy and comedy. These emotions are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> not supposed to be called upon in a meretricious way, because such an appeal is a waste of feeling. The exploitation of the real thing has the same relation to acting as pornography and masturbation have to sex and passion . . . It's not weak to give way to tears, but it's a bit weak to give way to them *every time*. In resisting the artifice, it helps to be observant and detached enough to see how the trick is done.

In the case not only of Christopher Reeve but also that of Kirk Douglas, who had to speak out of one side of his mouth because of the effects of a recent stroke, we are "being subjected to what used to be called emotional blackmail." And Hitchens also gently points out that, so far from being "courageous," as Reeve claimed it was, the Hollywood social conscience always plays it safe and is usually just an excuse for self-congratulation or self-pity. Hitchens himself here shows considerable courage of the sort that it usually takes to speak truth to a powerful sentimentalist. Predictably enough, the *Post* received outraged letters from readers unembarrassed at being too stupid to understand that he was not advocating locking up the handicapped or mocking the emotions of others.

But it is really that—embarrassment—which is our subject here. Hitchens wrote another brilliant piece in the March number of *Vanity Fair* about the unembarrassability not just of our public figures but of pretty much everybody. Unironically flanked by photographs of people in their (or, prominently, someone else's) underwear or night clothes, his essay called in ringing tones for all of us to adopt a phrase once used by David Letterman when he found himself the recipient of some unsolicited sexual confidences from Howard Stern: "Too much information!"

Yes indeed! Nor is Hitchens the only person to notice "The Death of Shame." Politicians on both sides of the political spectrum have called for its return as a means of social control. Stuart Schneiderman, a psychoanalyst, has just written a book called *Saving Face: America and the*

Sewanee Writers' Conference

July 16–28, 1996

The University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee

✣ ✣ ✣

Workshops in Poetry, Fiction, and Playwriting.

Bill Baer
Russell Banks
Georges Borchardt
Anne Borchardt
James Gordon Bennett
Michael Carlisle
John Casey
George Core
Dave DeChristopher
Mary Flinn
Horton Foote
David Godine
Rachel Hadas
Henry Hart
Anthony Hecht
Amy Hempel
Gail Hochman
Mark Jarman
Donald Justice
Romulus Linney
A. Walton Litz
David Lynn
Alice McDermott
Robert McDowell
Mary Morris
Tim O'Brien
Francine Prose
Shannon Ravenel
Robert Richman
Dave Smith
R. T. Smith
Monroe Spears
Robert Stone
Mark Strand

Wyatt Prunty, *Director*

✣ ✣ ✣

Fellowships and Scholarships available.

For information write or call:

Cheri Bedell Peters, Conference Administrator
Sewanee Writers' Conference
310B St. Luke's Hall • 735 University Avenue
Sewanee, TN 37383-1000
(615) 598-1141

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Politics of Shame (Knopf, 325 pages, $25). He makes of our apparent shamelessness a political issue, claiming that it was a result of "the Great American Cultural Revolution" of the 1960s which has lasted to our present-day obsession with "self-esteem." Schneiderman's prescription for a whole host of social ills is that America should become more like Japan, or other traditionalist cultures of the East, in being a "shame culture" rather than a "guilt culture." Sounds simple, doesn't it?

The return of shame is almost the only political idea associated with the name of Colin Powell—which goes to show you how much of a politician Powell is. For the return of shame cannot be a political idea. Early in April, Henry Allen wrote a piece on the subject in *The Washington Post*'s Style section—where most of the ideas at the *Post* seem to germinate first—in which he examined the issue with more wit than cogency, saying among other things that "shame is power. Hitler understood this." Aha! Its association with dangerous right-wing projects is accomplished. But the interesting thing about shame, I would have thought, is precisely that it is power which, if it can be used, cannot be created, either for good or for bad, by politicians. Shame is an organic product; it is the involuntary nervous system of the body politic. We can teach ourselves, with difficulty, not to feel it, but we cannot create it by taking thought. Either it is there or it isn't.

The shamelessness which Hitchens deplores is really a kind of bad manners, a failure of our culture's traditional systems of shame management which comes from our attempts to deny shame's existence. We are ashamed of being ashamed. It seems so primitive and unseemly an emotion for enlightened and sophisticated creatures such as ourselves. So we loudly pretend to be unashamed. This is what produces the social spectacle of the afternoon TV talk shows which people watch not because they have lost the sense of shame but because they are fascinated by the thought that others have. Of course, the others haven't either. It's like pornography: men pay to see women acting out masculine fantasies because they want to believe that those fantasies can come true. The women they watch are no more inclined to those fantasies, probably, than the women in their own lives but they pretend to be for money. Somewhere deep inside, the consumers of pornography know this, but they don't care. The promise of an end to inhibition is too intoxicating.

And so it is with shame. The allure of Ricki Lake or Montel Williams is like that of the quack therapist who promises a reward of psychic tranquility and happiness for those who can suppress their sense of shame and stop suppressing everything else. It is the poor man's version of the promise that our political culture holds out to politicians on occasions such as the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner: conceal nothing; reveal everything. Strip down to your bare humanity and we will love you for it. Like the promise of the pornographer and the quack therapist, it is a lie. But it is a lie we cannot live without, so long as we choose to live in a world with celebrities rather than heroes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fiction chronicle

Intellects & addicts

by Brooke Allen

A. S. Byatt is something rare in contemporary literature: a fiercely intellectual writer who nevertheless manages to make her work accessible to readers who are less intellectually inclined. She achieves this more successfully in some of her books than in others: *Possession*, of course, was her most commercial, and possibly her best, effort.

Babel Tower,[1] the third novel of a planned quartet (the first two are *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*) is as compellingly readable as *Possession*, though it might perhaps appeal to a rather smaller group of readers. It is an ambitious work that raises any number of interlocking questions, and in telling its ostensible story—the not unusual one of a woman's search for meaning and wholeness outside of marriage—it engages many of the contradictions of nineteenth and twentieth century literature and philosophy.

It is 1964. Frederica, in her mid to late twenties, has married the wrong man for the wrong reasons. The daughter of a middle-class family of freethinkers, she studied literature at Cambridge and enjoyed a life there of intoxicating intellectual and sexual liberty. But when she is thrown off balance after the shocking death of her sister, she accepts the comfort offered by Nigel Reiver, the attractive scion of a horsey, county family and the sort of upper-class philistine to whom Hardy was referring when he stated that "we Britons hate ideas, and we are going to live up to that privilege of our native country."

Frederica views her own situation in terms of Forster's *Howards End*. She is beglamoured by Margaret Schlegel and, seeing in Nigel and his ancestral house a modern likeness to Mr. Wilcox and Howards End, she follows Margaret's injunction, "only connect," and marries Nigel. In her decision she is inspired not only by Forster but by Ursula and Birkin's ideal of the perfect oneness in *Women in Love*, "the wonder of existing not as oneself, but in a consummation of my being and her being in a new one, a new paradisal unit regained from the duality." With the Reivers, as with Forster's Wilcoxes, the connection is a failure, or rather is insufficient to the very different characters of the protagonists. The intellectual Frederica, a woman whose greatest passion is not sex but thought, is bound to the very physical Nigel who hates and distrusts abstract thought of any kind. Frederica is as trapped as another of Forster's heroes, Rickey of *The Longest Journey*: like him, she is exiled from the free society of the mind represented by Cambridge and bound to a chained friend who eventually becomes a jealous foe. As Nigel, personally threatened by the joy Frederica takes in books, resorts first to mental cruelty and then to physical violence, Frederica becomes literally a prisoner at Bran House:

1 *Babel Tower*, by A. S. Byatt; Random House, 640 pages, $25.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tennyson's Mariana in the moated grange, guarded by Nigel's inscrutable sisters and Pippy Mammott, a sinister Mrs. Danvers figure.

It is thus that the young men she had known and loved at Cambridge find her, and like a band of knights they determine to rescue her from these ogres. But the rescue is not so easily effected: Frederica has a small son, and her terror of losing him gives Nigel a psychological advantage over her. Also, like many another woman, she is prone to blame herself rather than her husband for her plight: "it's all my fault," is her constant, and infuriating, refrain. But eventually she makes her way to London and takes up the life she might have known had she not met Nigel, doing some odd literary work and teaching literature in night classes. In due course she files for divorce.

Interspersed with this story is a parallel one: a fable, written in slightly archaic language, about an idealistic group of utopians who left Paris after the Terror in order to found a community in the countryside. They settle in La Tour Bruyarde, the ancestral home of their charismatic and brilliant young leader, Culvert. The inhabitants of La Tour Bruyarde speak in the philosophical terms of the early Romantic period, expressing a belief that what is natural is good, and that it is possible to live in perfect freedom and mutual accord. Benign at first, Culvert is apparently based upon the early nineteenth-century French utopian Charles Fourier, who is descibed as "a gentle and eccentric thinker who . . . believed human harmony could be achieved by indulging all human passions and desires."

But as the community becomes increasingly isolated from the outside world and Culvert pushes his definition of "freedom" to ever new and frightening limits, he comes increasingly to resemble a more sinister contemporary of Fourier's, the Marquis de Sade, who "asks, if we are free to follow our passions, who can prevent us from following our desire to hurt others, to kill, to rape, to torture? Those are, he says, human passions; they are *natural*." Eventually Culvert's mistress, much like the modern Frederica, is forced to flee her moated grange.

As the novel progresses, the connection between the two stories becomes evident; the historical fable turns out to be a novel called *Babbletower* which is being written by a provocative and physically repulsive artist's model of Frederica's acquaintance, Jude Mason. Frederica recommends *Babbletower* to the publisher she assists; the novel is published, and promptly, on the wake of the *Lady Chatterley* trial, prosecuted under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act. The two trials—Frederica's divorce and Jude's book trial—are conducted almost simultaneously. Each one distorts the reality of the events and characters it seeks to define through the use of formulaic language, and by interpreting events through the ill-conceived standards of the fearful, philistine culture itself.

The relevance of Culvert and his followers to the 1960s *Zeitgeist* also becomes increasingly evident. Byatt presents the Sixties as a late and violent manifestation of the Romantic ethos, and all the fallacies of that ethos are represented in the goings-on of Swinging London. As we muse on de Sade and his ideas about liberty, we are reminded that when Frederica arrives in London, *Marat-Sade* is all the rage, "a theatre of blood, of screams, of bodily extremity." Culvert, like the D. H. Lawrence whose work Frederica examines with her students, "hoped to make the rhythm of the people's blood hum to the rhythm of the turning earth and light the fire of the new Sun in all their hearts." William Blake, the author of the phrase "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires," haunts the conscious and subconscious lives of the London characters. And a charismatic minister, Gideon Farrar, has founded a religious order called the Children of Joy whose strange sexual ceremonies mirror those of Culvert's group.

A subplot involves a government com-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mission looking into possible educational reforms, a major topic of debate during the Sixties, when educators sought to make learning more fun and "relevant" by increasing the pupil's individual freedom. The commission visits various experimental "open classrooms" and reflects on the nature of learning. Though open classrooms seem to have been the order of the day—as they continue to be some thirty years later—various characters in *Babel Tower*, clearly reflecting Byatt's own views, are not persuaded. "Rules facilitate," says one. "Rules create order, and without order is no creativity. . . . There is a pleasure in learning ordered rules which seems now to be despised." Another work of art to which *Babel Tower* obliquely refers is *Lord of the Flies*.

But originality at all costs, creativity *ex nihilo*, is the fashion; the art students of Frederica's acquaintance resist learning about Giotto or Titian, for fear the masters should prove too influential and stand in the way of pure inspiration. Another trend which became prevalent in the Sixties, that of seeing teaching as a kind of therapy, is fiercely resisted by Frederica, who "retorts that she is not a therapist, and her students are not sick. They are intelligent people, who need to think hard and deep, and don't get the opportunity."

Byatt raises a seemingly infinite number of questions: about language and thought, freedom and captivity, the condition of women and the various reasons for it, Romanticism and its follies. The novel answers very few of these questions, which makes it all the more compelling. Life is composed of a series of complex and reverberating choices; we can choose our bonds, our chained friends or jealous foes, or we can, conceivably, be free.

The hype that has attended the publication of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*,[2] and the rave reviews that have poured in right on cue are, on the whole, unjustified. No kidding, you will say; no one short of a new Melville or Twain should merit the kind of oohing and aahing that has gone on in the pages of *New York* magazine and *The New York Times*, among other publications. Nevertheless, Wallace is extremely gifted and might indeed qualify as the definitive Generation X writer, though not everyone will take that to be an accolade. *The New York Times Magazine* has called Wallace the Nineties version of Jay McInerney. I suppose that this is their idea of a compliment: after all, McInerney got to be rich and famous. But McInerney's fame was the product of gimmicky writing and dedicated party-going. Wallace's sudden renown is based on a very real talent and the kind of magical ear that few writers even come close to. An example: one man approaches another after an AA meeting. "Good to hear you, I could really I. D. with that bottom you were sharing about, the isolating, the can't and can't, it's the greenest I've felt in months, hearing you." At another AA meeting, when a preppy guy demurs from giving a ceremonial hug to Roy, a scary-looking black man, claiming that he's "simply uncomfortable with the whole idea of hugging," Roy goes into a fit:

> "You think I fucking *like* to go around hug on folks? You think *any* of us *like* this *shit*? We fucking do what they tell us. They tell us Hugs Not Drugs in here. We done motherfucking *surrendered* our wills in here," Roy said. "You little faggot," Roy added. . . . "I done had to give four hugs my first night here and then I gone ran in the fucking can and fucking puked. *Puked*," he said. "Not *com*fortable? Who the *fuck* are you? Don't *even* try and tell me I'm coming over feeling *com*fortable about trying to hug on your James-River-Traders-wearing-Calvin-Klein-aftershave-smelling-goofy-ass motherfucking ass."

Infinite Jest has many such golden moments, but it is hard and occasionally painful to dredge through all the nonessential verbiage to get to them: the book is an un-

2 *Infinite Jest*, by David Foster Wallace; Little Brown, 1,079 pages, $29.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

holy 1,079 pages long. That seems, in fact, to be the novel's one truly unforgettable feature, its defining characteristic. The general reader who has heard of *Infinite Jest* might not remember much about it, but he always remembers that it is enormous.

This is not the Renaissance, where books such as *The Decameron* (in Penguin, 833 pages) or *Don Quixote* (1,050 pages in a Signet edition) were not out of line within their culture. Nor is it the nineteenth century, when novels such as *The Pickwick Papers* (863 pages, Signet) appeared in serial form and were read over a period of many months. It is America, some decades after the Hemingway revolution. Why then might a novelist decide to create a work of such length? I can think of four reasons: (1) he has so enormously much to say on his subject that any length is justified; (2) he is not skillful enough to control his prose; (3) he is mentally unbalanced; (4) he is making a bid for attention.

In Wallace's case, the first proposition is nonsense: his subject, addiction in its many manifestations, is unquestionably interesting but for every arresting insight or observation the reader must slog through scores —no, hundreds—of paralyzingly boring pages about the mechanics of drug taking or tennis drills (and I am a tennis fan; I weep for the reader who is not). At his worst Wallace writes a sticky and opaque prose:

> . . . which balcony means that even the worst latex slip-and-slide off the steeply curved cerebrum's edge would mean a fall of only a few meters to the broad butylene platform, from which a venous-blue emergency ladder can be detached and lowered to extend down past the superior temporal gyrus and Pons and abducent to hook up with the polyurethane basilar-stem artery and allow a safe shimmy down to the good old oblongata just outside the rubberized meantus at ground zero.

And that is only the last quarter of the sentence! About halfway through *Infinite Jest*, I found myself suffering from the same symptoms—blazing migraine, exhaustion, and depression—that assailed the hapless readers of the high-art novel in Martin Amis's *The Information*, making me think Amis a rather more perceptive writer than I had previously believed him to be.

To go back to the four propositions above, the second is doubtful; it is hard to believe that a writer as clearly intelligent as Wallace is incapable of controlling and shaping a novel. The third is a distinct possibility: Wallace has, in any case, admitted to having undergone serious problems with depression and addiction (the drug-obsessed characters and detailed scenes at AA were clearly based on reality) and one might reasonably make a connection between addiction to substances and a perverse addiction to writing; perhaps Wallace was simply incapable of dragging himself away from his word processor.

When it comes to the terrors and compulsions of addiction, Wallace can write masterfully. Not everyone will buy his vision of addiction as a metaphor for American society—that might be a theory with which only addicts can feelingly concur—but it is undeniable that addiction is a hot subject in today's world, and once you think in terms of addiction almost everything seems—spuriously, I believe—to be explainable in terms of it. Most of the characters in *Infinite Jest* have one self-destructive habit or another, be it alcohol, crack cocaine, marijuana (yes, it does seem that marijuana can hook you as surely as heroin), sex, success, or entertainment: the compulsion to be entertained is an addiction in its own right, and a lengthy and excruciatingly boring subplot is concerned with a subversive attack upon the United States (by Canadian separatists, of all things) effected through the introduction of a film that is a distillation of "orgasm, religious enlightenment, ecstatic drugs, shiatsu, a crackling fire on a winter night—the sum of all possible pleasures refined into pure current and deliverable at the flip of a hand-held lever."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This movie is so entertaining that anyone who watches it will remain helplessly glued to it, a lotus-eater without will or desire.

Wallace's descriptions of the testifying that goes on at AA meetings are so riveting that it is easy to see why, in the last decade, these get-togethers have become the entertainment of choice for leisured nonalchoholics in places like Los Angeles. These tales do not simply provide voyeuristic satisfaction, they describe every extreme of human behavior: far from simply showing how degraded human life can be, they also show the heights to which courage and heroism can attain. In a society in which the oral tradition and even live theater are practically dead, such narratives represent one of the few remaining examples of genuine public storytelling, far more honest and less theatricalized than the TV talk shows. In this arena, *Infinite Jest* has the shock power of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and it also provides the kind of fascinating material that was to be found in *Edie*, or in a less distinguished example of nonfiction narrative, Julia Phillips's *You'll Never Eat Lunch in this Town Again*: the simple wonder of how much abuse a body can take before it gives up the ghost, the amazement that the instinct for self-destruction can take such very bizarre forms.

So why is the book so long? The fourth possibility, that Wallace is simply asking for attention, is the most probable, and the fact that Little, Brown & Company has cheerfully played along would seem to clinch it. If so, the ploy has worked; but I would be curious to know how many of the book's fervent fans have actually read it, word for word. For myself, life seems too short to squander so many reading hours on something which is only intermittently rewarding.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication this month of *Vital Signs: Essays on American Literature and Criticism* by James W. Tuttleton (Ivan R. Dee, $27.50), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

What the devil said

by Tess Lewis

If I only could put my numb fingers
into the wounds of Man. These truly do not heal.
Ever.
The rest is silence.
—Aleksander Wat, "On Good Friday"

These lines conclude a poem written by the dissident Polish poet and essayist Aleksander Wat less than two months before his suicide in 1967. They capture the central concerns of Wat's life and art: the tension between a deep need for faith and an instinctive, pervasive doubt; the senselessness of most human suffering; and the failure of language. After the horrors of this century—many of which Wat experienced firsthand—he found belief in God all but impossible and the devil's existence undeniable. For Wat, the devil's incarnation at this moment in history was Communism, and Stalinism his purest manifestation.

In the West, Wat is best known for his spoken memoir *My Century*. Compiled from over twenty interviews recorded in 1964 by Czeslaw Milosz, it provides a detailed, intimate portrait of Poland between the wars, the battles within literary and Communist circles, and an intricate account of the Soviet prison system and the human microcosm within it. Wat's illness and early death cut these memoirs short, bringing the reader only to the end of his exile in Soviet Asia in 1946. Aside from two collections of his poetry, *Mediterranean Poems* (1977) and *With the Skin* (1989), and his short-story collection *Lucifer Unemployed* (1988), Wat's writing remains untranslated. In addition, little about him has been available in English. Tomas Venclova's critical biography, *Aleksander Wat: Life and Art of an Iconoclast*,[1] remedies this to a great extent.

Venclova, a Lithuanian poet and former dissident, now a professor of Russian and Eastern European Literatures at Yale University, is particularly well suited to illuminating Wat's work. With a discerning feel for the philosophical complexities and the linguistic intricacies of Wat's writing, Venclova fills in the gaps of Wat's life story, weaving biographical facts with literary criticism. Yet Venclova's account remains curiously two-dimensional. Wat's intellectual and political lives are well delineated, but his spiritual life remains elusive. It is perhaps impossible to do justice to a religious identity as complex and contradictory as Wat's, but it is, arguably, the most important aspect of his life.

An active and enthusiastic fellow traveler, Wat brought religious fervor to the Party without officially becoming a member. Yet his irreverence and obstinate opinions soon landed him in a series of Gulags. It was in 1941 in the bowels of the Saratov prison, 450 miles southeast of Moscow, that Wat came face to face with the devil. Nearly dead of starvation, suffering from dysentery

1 *Aleksander Wat: Life and Art of an Iconoclast*, by Tomas Venclova; Yale University Press, 369 pages, $35.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and a raging fever, Wat, the unabashed atheist, heard a vulgar, operatic laugh approaching and receding. Then the devil himself appeared, complete with hooves and smelling of brimstone, only to be followed by a vision of God. While the laughter turned out to have been the anti-aircraft alarm of a patrol boat on the Volga river (Hitler had recently launched Operation Barbarosa against the Soviet Union), the vision of God and the experience of an overarching unity transformed Wat's spiritual outlook. After this awakening, he no longer indulged in the atheistic bravado of his youth. Still, like many fervently religious men and women, he never fully overcame his religious ambivalence. This was perhaps in part due to the inevitable and disastrous spiritual overtones of his early politics. Like many of his generation, Wat was drawn to the secular faith of Communism by his inability to bear the rampant nihilism and disillusion that followed the First World War. Out of sheer metaphysical hunger, he turned a blind eye to the hollowness and hypocrisy of the Communists' political idealism. After his spiritual awakening, this moral lapse weighed on his conscience for the rest of his life, unsettling even his deepest beliefs.

Wat formally converted to Catholicism in 1953 but remained plagued with doubts about the authenticity of his conversion. He never received the Eucharist and never abandoned his Jewish roots. In fact, his religious thought remained, in the words of his biographer, an idiosyncratic amalgam of Judaism and Christianity coupled with an obvious failure to reconcile the two faiths. For the most part, Wat wrote of his religious faith most directly, and ambiguously, in his late poetry, devoting much of his prose to literature, his past, and to analyzing and exposing Communism. The roots of all three faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Communism—were entwined in his earliest origins.

Wat was born on May Day in 1900 to a Warsaw Jewish family that counted famous Kabbalists, rabbis, converts, even a priest, among its ancestors. Although his father was observant and an expert on the Kabbalah, and his mother was from an Orthodox household, Wat and his six brothers and sisters received classical, rather than religious, educations. One of his fondest childhood memories was of the Catholic Masses to which the family nurse had taken him in secret. The aestheticism of the liturgy and the symbolism of the crucifix gained a lasting hold on his imagination. Wat was an intellectual child prodigy, quickly mastering several languages, even reading Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in German at the age of ten. He read voraciously in other branches of philosophy and was well versed in the works of Kant and Nietzsche. While still an undergraduate, he talked his way into a graduate seminar by impressing the professor with his knowledge of Schopenhauer.

Wat soon developed a strong rebellious streak. At nineteen he was notorious in Warsaw literary circles as one of the founders of Polish Futurism. He and his colleagues staged rather adolescent Surrealist happenings and took up Marinetti's call to liberate language. Wat's most concerted effort to free the word from conventional meanings culminated in 1919 with *ME from One Side and ME from the Other Side of My Pug Iron Stove*, a volume of parody and blasphemy written in the white heat of *écriture automatique*. Although much of it is unreadable, *Pug Iron Stove* nonetheless betrays an impressive, if unpolished, literary talent. Wat came to understand the extreme consequences of unmooring language only much later when he witnessed the psychological damage wrought upon Russians and Eastern Europeans by the Stalinists' linguistic corruptions. But after this debut, Wat's poetic muse was stifled for almost four decades.

Internal and external circumstances contributed to this long abstinence from poetry. Wat was increasingly prey to the ideological rootlessness of the prewar years. The pervasiveness of his nihilism is evident

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the short stories he published in 1927. *Lucifer Unemployed* is a collection of mocking parables that cleverly overturn such basic humanistic cornerstones as religion, morality, and, paradoxically, even love, for he married the great love of his life, Ola Wat, that same year. In his ideological despair, Wat turned to Communism. Too much an individualist to join the ranks, he contented himself with promoting the cause and editing the most important Communist journal in Poland, *The Literary Monthly*, from 1929 to 1932. His editorship bought him several weeks in the relatively benign Warsaw Central Prison, the first of the fourteen prisons he would endure.

When Stalin invaded Poland seven years later, after charging the Polish Communist Party with treason and imprisoning or executing most of its functionaries, Wat's political past proved a serious liability. While Wat began an indefinite sentence in Soviet prisons in 1940, on accusations ranging from Zionism to being an agent of the Vatican, Ola and their nine-year-old son Andrzej were deported to a *kolkhoz* in Kazakhstan. Hitler's breach of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact brought about a general amnesty for imprisoned Poles and Wat was freed late in 1941. Yet his Soviet ordeal was far from finished. After months of searching throughout Soviet Asia, Wat was finally reunited with Ola and Andrzej. Wat and his family were then exiled to Ili, a desolate mountain village near the Chinese border. He was imprisoned once again when he organized resistance to the Stalinist NKVD's forced "passportization" of exiled Poles. Although soon released, Wat could not return to Poland until 1946.

Despite Wat's suspect past, his editorship of the prestigious *Literary Monthly* brought him some protection from the hard-line Stalinists in postwar Poland. Wat considered his term at the magazine, his most active collaboration with the Party, to have been the greatest sin of his life, yet it enabled him to eke out a living by editing and translating. He continued to write, but as a hostile element, was unable to publish. Wat felt it his basic duty to atone for those two or three years of "moral insanity," and launched a speech campaign against Stalinism. Beginning with a denunciation of Socialist Realism in 1948, he spoke out against the regime at every opportunity. Life became increasingly difficult, but Wat did not recant. Stalinism in Poland was at the height of its power in 1952, and signs of an impending arrest were accumulating. Former friends and acquaintances began to avoid Wat. Those he suspected were secret agents became increasingly friendly. The tension became too great. In early January 1953, Wat suffered a severe stroke. He was left with Wallenburg's syndrome, permanent neurological damage that caused him sporadic but unbearable pain for the next fourteen years of his life. The pain finally became more than he could bear, and he committed suicide in 1967.

"The devil behind my illness is the devil of communism," he declared in his memoirs. Although a true physical disability, his illness was in part psychosomatic, flaring up at times of tension, especially during discussions of Communism or in moments of creative frustration. The pain prevented him from realizing many literary projects but also seems to have been a catalyst for his mature poetry. After the political thaw of 1956, Wat was once again allowed to publish. *Poems*, his first volume of poetry in thirty-eight years, appeared to great acclaim in 1957, followed by *Mediterranean Poems* in 1962. A final volume of new and collected poems, *Dark Light*, was published posthumously in 1968.

Wat's late verse bears little resemblance to his Futurist creations. Baroque opulence alternates with deceptive spareness in these highly autobiographical poems that relentlessly examine the political and spiritual cataclysms of our century. Venclova's painstakingly exact analysis of his verse reveals how much of its macabre humor and rhythmic and syntactical complexity is lost in translation. Although he professed to distrust metaphors, Wat tended to think

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

metaphorically, especially in equating the personal with the historical. In much of his late poetry, his physical suffering, imprisonment, and spiritual despair mirror not only the suffering of totalitarianism's victims, but the human condition in general.

Wat developed the theme of totalitarianism more explicitly, if fragmentarily, in the prose of his later years. His illness prevented any sustained writing, but he did compose three volumes of self-analysis, literary and philosophical notes, and aphorisms and meditations. In numerous essays he examined the distorted behavior that had developed in the Soviet Union and its satellites, showing himself, according to Venclova, an ethnographer and anthropologist of Communism. Wat often returned to the destructive mechanism of Socialist Realism as symbolic of the system's modus operandi, and located the source of the system's power in its linguistic corruptions. By disrupting the basic semantic values of language, and thus disturbing the fundamental relation between truth and falsehood, Stalinists were able to manipulate their subjects' very consciousness. Stalin's genius, according to Wat, lay in establishing himself as the ultimate arbiter of reality by legislating meaning. While such analyses have proliferated in the recent past, Wat's remains one of the most discerning, enriched by his poetic sensibility and the immediacy of personal experience.

Until more of Wat's work is translated, English speakers must rely on Venclova's biography for a sense of his intellectual subtlety and poetic gifts. Venclova could have provided more evidence of Wat's influence on later generations of Polish poets and could also have dealt at greater length with Wat's spiritual struggles. Nonetheless, Venclova amply supports his claims for Wat's intellectual powers and vividly portrays the man's relentless honesty and moral courage. What finally emerges from this biography is a portrait of that rare creature, a twentieth-century poet and intellectual who refused the compromises made by so many of his contemporaries.

Cooper & son

Alan Taylor William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic. Knopf, 549 pages, $35

reviewed by Richard Brookhiser

William Cooper's Town by Alan Taylor, recently awarded the Pulitzer Prize in History, is that rarest of things: readable social history. Whether guided by academic theorizing about "narrative," or (more likely) his own good instincts, Mr. Taylor realized that the voting records, tax rolls, Masonic lodge membership lists, and farm produce statistics that are the stuff of Ph.D. theses lie dead on the page unless they are attached to interesting lives. Call it the great-enough man theory of history. In laying out the history of Cooperstown, New York, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mr. Taylor has two unusually interesting men to work with—William Cooper, land speculator and congressman, and James Fenimore Cooper, his youngest son, and America's first successful novelist. *William Cooper's Town* illuminates an era, as well as *The Leatherstocking Tales*, the cycle of novels that, for all their creakiness, can still inspire Hollywood movies and serious thought.

William Cooper was born in 1754 to poor Quaker farmers on the outskirts of Philadelphia, and became a wheelwright. But he was ambitious, marrying a rich farmer's daughter, and checking books out of the library for edification and self-improvement (he borrowed one volume of the *London Magazine* five times). By the mid-1780s, he had become a successful storeowner and real estate developer in New Jersey.

But he was drawn to the frontier, which then lay in western New York. The Iroquois Indians had picked the wrong side in the Revolutionary War, and vast tracts west of the Hudson river were open for settlement. Cooper found a partner to help with the cash, and a New York lawyer, Alexander Hamilton, to sort out the vague prewar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

claims, and in 1786, became the co-owner of forty thousand acres, centered on picturesque Otsego Lake.

Cooper benefited from an influx of farmers from crowded New England. He made them an attractive offer: he sold lots, instead of leasing them; he required no money down; and he built amenities (what we would nowadays call infrastructure). "He who comes to better his condition," Cooper later explained, ". . . will look for some religious institution, some school for his children. There must be mechanics to build houses, and erect mills." Finally, Cooper himself moved to Cooperstown to make sure that everything worked.

By living on site, he sought to gratify other ambitions besides moneymaking. He wanted to be the American equivalent of an English country gentleman; his house, named the Manor House, was in the center of town. The residents of Cooperstown reciprocated by calling him the Father of his County, and by sending him to Congress, as a Federalist, for two terms in the 1790s. Cooper never learned to spell, and he never backed out of a fist-fight. But he had made it: he dined with President Washington; the exiled Talleyrand wrote a poem to his daughter Hannah.

The fall was as quick as the ascent. The first debacle was political. In 1799, Cooper, who also served as a judge, prosecuted Jedidiah Peck, a prominent local Republican, under the Sedition Act. Peck's tribulations turned western New York, formerly a Federalist bastion, into a hotbed of Republicanism. This, and Aaron Burr's machinations in New York City, tipped the state, and the presidency, to Thomas Jefferson in 1800. In the annals of electoral *maladresse*, Cooper belongs with Richard Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President.

Financial ruin followed. Cooper tried other development schemes, in less promising places, which all failed. Falling agricultural prices cut into his profits, and old claims, which Hamilton had not entirely cleared up, involved him in lawsuits. Meanwhile, unpaid debts swelled alarmingly. Cooper raised his sons to be gentlemen, though all they learned was laziness and bad behavior. William, Jr., the third son, was expelled from Princeton for setting fire to Nassau Hall, and James, the fifth son, was expelled from Yale for blowing the knob off another student's door with gunpowder. When they weren't raising hell, they weren't tending to business. Creditors snapped up all the family holdings by 1834.

William Cooper didn't live to see it. He had died in 1809, from a blow to the head in a political argument, according to a family tradition preserved by a great-grandson, and repeated in books ever since. One of Taylor's cleverest feats is proving, as surely as inferences can prove anything, that the tradition is wrong. The Father of his County died of natural causes.

The finale to this frontier *Buddenbrooks* was James's decision, after serving two years in the Navy and making a good marriage, to write novels. Alan Taylor offers to explain *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper's third novel, in which he recreated his father and the Cooperstown of the early 1790s as Judge Marmaduke Temple and Templeton.

Explanations of Cooper are not in heavy demand these days. His is one of the great sunken reputations of literature, lying on the seabed of oblivion alongside Sir Walter Scott's. Mark Twain's wicked little essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," discourages salvagers. When *The Last of the Mohicans* was playing in movie theaters a few years ago, every reviewer seemed to have read Twain, but none had read Cooper.

And indeed he committed many offenses. His prose, with a few exceptions, is one long bumble. His humorous minor characters are as funny as a visit to the dentist. Then there are the frequent absurdities of plot and incident which Twain mocked (though the man who contrived the ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* might have been more charitable).

But there are good reasons to read him nevertheless. The first is the character of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Natty Bumppo, who binds *The Leatherstocking Tales* together. The series consists of *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). Natty Bumppo's adventures, written out of sequence, span sixty years, from the French and Indian Wars to the Louisiana Purchase, and he became a template for American icons. With some debt to the figure of Daniel Boone, Bumppo is the literary father of legions of gunslingers, Indian fighters, and private eyes, lonely men of action and honor. He is a garrulous figure, given to moralizing, but when he acts, he does not waste a motion.

> It was now, when the body of his enemy was most collected together, that the agitated weapon of the scout was drawn to his shoulder. The surrounding rocks, themselves, were not steadier than the piece became when it poured out its contents.

When he must refrain from acting, he does so with equal steadiness. Two companions of his level their rifles and pull the triggers:

> The effort was answered by the mere snapping of the locks.
>
> "Enough," said [Natty], rising with dignity. "I have cast away the priming, for certain death would have followed your rashness. Now, let us meet our fates like men."

He knows when to hold his fire, and when he fires, he never misses.

But there is another, surprising side to Cooper, and that is social realism. *The Pioneers* is as detailed as *William Cooper's Town*, and more vivid. We see conniving lawyers, quarreling religious denominations, and bullying officeholders. We see a hunt of passenger pigeons, and are given Judge Temple's melancholy thoughts on the likely result of such slaughters. We see Brom Freeborn, a free black man, playing the fool in order to get along with his neighbors. We see aspirations for higher things and the frustrations they often encounter. Judge Temple's house has a portico, supported by four wooden columns, resting on a stone platform.

> The ascent to the platform was by five or six stone steps, somewhat hastily laid together, and which the frost had already begun to move. But the evils of a cold climate, and a superficial construction did not end there. As the steps lowered, the platform necessarily fell also . . . leaving an open space of about a foot between the base of the pillars and the stones.

But all this is told in a tone which, while unsparing, is never bitter. It has, as Taylor says, a "dreamlike intensity." Cooper told one publisher that he had written *The Pioneers* so rapidly that he had not "been even able to *read* it."

Taylor shows how the novelist both corrected and recovered aspects of his father's world. Cooper smoothed out Cooperstown's politics and the judge's combativeness. But he also acknowledged that Otsego Lake had not been virgin territory when William Cooper bought it, as the judge sometimes liked to claim, but that it had been occupied by colonial landowners, Indians, and squatters. All these appear in *The Pioneers* as supporting characters—Oliver Effingham, a mysterious young Englishman; Old John, a drunken Indian basket-weaver; and Natty Bumppo—who, in this, his first appearance, is in his early seventies.

Cooper resolved the first of these conflicts by marrying Effingham, the rightful titleholder, to Elizabeth Temple, the judge's daughter. No lawsuits, no bankruptcy; Mr. and Mrs. Effingham can become the Father and Mother of their County in the second generation. Appropriately enough, this violation of reality gives rise to the most labored plot twist that Cooper ever concocted—far more ridiculous than the Indian hijinks Twain laughed at. When the realist strayed furthest from the conflicts of Cooperstown, he produced the only blemish on his book.

What falls beyond the purview of Taylor's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

book is Cooper's turn away from realism after *The Pioneers*. When he focused on Natty Bumppo and turned a supporting character into a myth, he left society behind. So, to all serious intents and purposes, did American letters. All the labors of Henry James and Mrs. Wharton hardly sufficed to bring society back.

Yet *The Leatherstocking Tales*, paradoxically, are not just an escape into the wish fulfillment of wilderness action, but a closer look at the darkness of life and the human heart. All the novels are marked by violence, populated by sinners red and white, and haunted by loss. *The Last of the Mohicans* ends with the death of a noble Indian; *The Prairie* ends with the death of Natty Bumppo. In *The Pathfinder*, Natty falls in love—in vain; marriage and family are not for him. *The Deerslayer*, which has an even more abortive love interest, ends with this stern thought:

> We live in a world of transgressions and selfishness, and no pictures that represent us otherwise can be true, though, happily for human nature, gleamings of that pure spirit in whose likeness man has been fashioned are to be seen, relieving its deformities and mitigating if not excusing its crimes.

William Cooper's Town shows us where James Fenimore Cooper began, but to figure out why he fled to the wilderness, and what he found there, we must do him the courtesy of reading him.

A minor Augustan

Richard Davenport-Hines Auden. Pantheon, 406 pages, $30

reviewed by Donald Lyons

Auden biography has now reached a sort of tertiary stage. First came the polite reminiscences; then, tell-all chronicles such as Humphrey Carpenter's. Now, with *Auden* by Richard Davenport-Hines, we get an attempt to find figures in the stained, messy carpet of the life. The events of the writer's life we can take as read (there is little new or newly handled here): he was born in 1907, the youngest of three sons of a kindly Yorkshire doctor and a snobbish, fragile mother; Oxford in 1925; a year in sexy Berlin; a spell of schoolteaching; Spain; Iceland with Louis MacNeice; China with Christopher Isherwood; to America with Isherwood in 1939 on the eve of war; settling in New York with Chester Kallman; shuttling back and forth in the postwar years from St. Mark's Place to Ischia to Oxford to Austria, where he died in 1973. Ideas, feelings, and words must, of course, flesh out such a skeleton. It must be said that Auden's ideas ran with fashion: first, Freud in the 1920s and 1930s; then, later, God. Quacks like Emile Coué, Homer Lane, Gerald Heard, and Marx were taken at points seriously. But poets, it will be said, notoriously whore after silly notions, and Auden did at last settle down into a philosophy of citified, cultivated comfiness. None of his systems, save perhaps the last, really offered a safe haven for his homosexuality, which therefore, while privately flaunting, in his published writings he disguised or generalized.

As if to compensate for the poet's coded reticences, Davenport-Hines sees his homosexuality as central, is touchy and defensive about it, and labels virtually any criticism of Auden's writing as homophobic. In his prewar heyday, when he was routinely and universally acclaimed as Eliot's heir and perhaps superior, Auden's weightiest critics were F. R. Leavis and George Orwell. Leavis thought Auden an arrested schoolboy and an artistic nullity: Davenport-Hines sees this view as exemplifying "the psychoanalytical derogation of homosexuality as an arrested development and the corresponding over-valuation of the ethical power of family life." Leavis, notoriously, had a wife and children—enough, apparently, to excite this biographer's suspicion that he was criticizing Auden from a *parti pris*. As for Orwell—well, Orwell, of course, lambasted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the glib terrorist-chic of Auden's "Spain 1937" ("To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,/ The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder") as a "brand of immoralism . . . only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled." That this was the legitimate reading of Auden's words was tacitly admitted by the poet's later squirming revisions of them. There may, too, have been a hint in Orwell at Auden's having scampered off to safety from the Blitz. (This biographer seems, by the way, unaware of Evelyn Waugh's savage caricature of Auden as the defecting poetaster Parsnip in *Put Out More Flags*, although he does say that to have criticized Auden for his expatriation was as wicked as to have criticized Oscar Wilde for his incarceration.) But for Davenport-Hines it's just homophobia pure and simple; he refers to Orwell's "sexual rubbishing" and "Etonian bullying" of poor Auden. But Orwell the gay-basher is only the half of it for Davenport-Hines. He cites, at second hand, minor litterateur Rayner Heppenstall's delusion that Orwell had had, years back, a violent crush on him, Heppenstall. So! Now we know why Orwell had it in for the sainted Auden: he was not just a gay-basher but a conflicted closet gay.

And this is not an isolated performance: Davenport-Hines's compulsive basher-sniffing is risible. It's his King Charles's head—and he wields it with the clumsy shrillness of yesteryear's Marxists exposing the bourgeois roots of such-and-such a writer. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Davenport-Hines is more Catholic on this matter than his pope: Auden, for example, once said, "I've come to the conclusion that it is wrong to be queer." And Auden, a fastidious writer, would have also parted company with Davenport-Hines in the matter of correct English; he would have been incapable of writing a phrase like "the specialists whom he believed were fragmenting human vision." On the poetry itself Davenport-Hines does little but strew epithets: "September 1, 1939" is "neither contemptible nor insignificant"; "The Shield of Achilles" is "great"; "At the Grave of Henry James" is "superb"; about "In Praise of Limestone" we hear, otiosely, that "the beauty in flaws, and the necessity of faults, are the subject." Davenport-Hines shows, in fact, no ability to discuss poetry at all; he is, for instance, silent about Auden's proud technical virtuosity, his habile manipulation of meter, stanza, and rhyme. This, then, is a tendentious and incompetent book, unworthy of its subject, whatever one thinks of him.

And what to think of him? To Hugh Kenner, he is a light versifier, marginal to modern poetry; for Edward Mendelson, his excellent editor, he is "the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century." Mendelson sees Auden as having trumped the modernists at their own game, saying that

> he welcomed into his poetry all the disordered conditions of his time, all its variety of language and event. In this, as in almost everything else, he differed from his modernist predecessors such as Yeats, Lawrence, Eliot or Pound, who had turned nostalgically away from a flawed present to some lost illusory Eden where life was unified, hierarchy secure, and the grand style a natural extension of the vernacular. All of this Auden rejected. His continuing subject was the task of the present moment: erotic and political tasks in his early poems, ethical and religious ones later.

This eloquent assessment has, I fear, the disadvantage of being totally and demonstrably untrue. The four poets cited as hewing to a grand style were actually, in very different ways, radical innovators in diction, music, and content. Think just of the demotic sounds in fierce Yeats, urgent Lawrence, angry Pound, tormented Eliot. By contrast, Auden's lifelong diction was polite, generalizing, urbane, wry, composed.

As for the notion that Auden introduced the twentieth century into verse, could that survive the most cursory glance at, say, "Easter 1916" or "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or "The Waste Land"? And as for hankering after illusory Edens, was it not Auden's mind and language that were steeped in the *topoi* and symbolic personalities of classical literature? And although Auden presents thoughts in his verse, he does not think—actually wrestle with concepts—in verse, as do great modern poets like Stevens and Rilke, both of whom put standard verse lengths to radical purposes. Auden deals out commonplaces—or faux commonplaces. He seems less a modernist—any kind of modernist—than an Augustan, and a minor Augustan at that; he might be a graver Gay. But Auden's much-dreamed-of City is never anything as specific as Gay's London: it stays always the Idea of a City, although Auden was in other ways a very anti-Platonic Platonist.

Like a good Augustan, Auden naturally thought in categories and generalities. He was an inveterate binary taxonomist: artists are either placid Alices or touchy Mabels; citizens are either hedonist Arcadians or coercive Utopians ("Vespers"); students are either playful followers of Hermes or careerist devotees of Apollo ("Under Which Lyre"); intemperate passion becomes either Tristan-Isolde Lesbianism or serial Don Giovanni cruising. His pen is a fountain of bifurcations, trifurcations, lists and diagrams; his writing sports an Alexandrian learning and a genially attractive wisdom. What he is not is a major poet; his sort of mind ranges freest and liveliest and most unbuttoned in prose. Even his best verse has the mellowly, laxly discursive, thesis-antithesis, μέν–δέ verve of a certain kind of expository prose. His best poetic achievements involve the use for grim irony of normally light meters: trimeters like those of "September 1, 1939" or octosyllabics like those of "The Fall of Rome."

I would give his poetic corpus for *The Dyer's Hand*, that inexhaustibly suggestive volume of essays. Open anywhere and he's delightfully at it: Falstaff and Don Quixote as antithetical types; the genius versus the apostle as Ibsenian heroes. In the essay "The Guilty Vicarage," he memorably anatomizes the detective story: "There are three classes of crime. . . . For suspects the five principal causes of guilt are. . . ." I'll conclude with this from *The Dyer's Hand*, so typical in its half-satisfying, half-irritating mixture of profound and superficial, frivolous and serious: "One can conceive of Heaven having a Telephone Directory, but it would have to be gigantic, for it would include the Proper Name and address of every electron in the Universe. But Hell could not have one, for in Hell, as in prison and the army, its inhabitants are identified not by name but by number. They do not *have* numbers, they *are* numbers." There are moments when Auden's ease works and he does indeed seem to achieve what may be thought to have been his goal of combining Johnsonian generalizing grandeur with Mozartian lightness. Or, to put it in another way that would not displease him, he marries the taxonomic frenzy of Thomas Aquinas to the whimsical logic of Lewis Carroll.

A great poet? No. But a tonic presence in the meadows of letters—our century's Peacock, perhaps. And he has a successor in the essay, someone whose prose strives with Russian intensity not to be intense but to be Audenesque: Joseph Brodsky.

Luminous particulars

Jane Kenyon Otherwise:
New and Selected Poems.
Graywolf Press, 232 pages, $23.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

Jane Kenyon's death from leukemia at the age of forty-eight in April 1995 was a significant loss to American poetry. As frequent publishers of her work—from 1984 to 1991, twenty-five of her poems appeared in our pages—we feel the loss especially acutely. It is offset somewhat by the publication of *Otherwise*, which contains a selection from Kenyon's four previous books as well as twenty-one new poems, most of which were written before she became ill in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

January 1994. (The only unrepresented book is the 1986 chapbook, *Twenty Poems of Anna Akhmatova*.) But if *Otherwise* confirms Kenyon's place in the first rank of the poets of her generation, it is also an unhappy reminder that we will have no more poems from her pen.

Unique is a much misused term these days, yet there is no poet to whom it may be applied more justly than Jane Kenyon. Ours is the age of the pigeonhole, in which poets are forever being forced into niches, no matter how uncomfortable the fit. In Kenyon's case, the main temptation seems to be to lump her with "confessional" poets—those who write in the manner of Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell (in his later work) and for whom the revelation of personal matters is primary. A second temptation—at least when Kenyon is not writing about death and illness—is to diminish her achievement by consigning her to the ranks of nature poets who dispense hackneyed "truths" about the hills and mountains.

In fact, Jane Kenyon fits comfortably into neither category. Indeed, her resistance to easy categorization is one mark of the special character of her writing. There are in her work sharp bifurcations of mood and spirit—between a dark, inward-looking self, and a hopeful, outward-looking one. These doublenesses, in which contrasting emotions sometimes compete for our attention in the space of a few lines, do not cancel each other out so much as enrich our experience. "The soul's bliss// and suffering are bound together/ like the grasses," Kenyon writes in "Twilight: After Haying," a sentiment that is manifested again and again in these sometimes blissful, sometimes painful poems.

Everywhere one looks, in fact, one sees a poet writing in ways wholly unlike other "confessional" or "country" poets. Whether it is a flash of humor in the midst of the despair, or an unexpected reaction to nature—the New Hampshire countryside gets most of Kenyon's attention—she refuses to be tempted by any form of poetic cliché, including, one might add, that of speaking as a woman to women. This, together with a masterly proselike style—one that has been perfected in our day by Louis Simpson, and which is one of the hardest to master and to appreciate—guarantees that Kenyon's poetry will endure.

I have gone on record to note my dislike of "confessional" verse. Often the last hope of the mediocre poet, "confessional" poetry places too great an emphasis on the merely personal. It traffics in a subject matter that, precisely because it is so closely bound up with the poet's private experiences, is beyond criticism—at least literary criticism. I prefer an odyssey of invention that is untethered to the small events of personal life, and I tend to admire most those poets who transform rather than merely recapitulate their experience. Yet, despite my reservations, I have to acknowledge that there are poets who have used their private experience and their skills as reporters to good effect. L. E. Sissman, whose struggle with cancer became the focus of his late poems, is one. And the arc of Kenyon's grief, spanning the illnesses and deaths of friends and family, her husband's illness, and lastly her own, seems even larger than Sissman's.

On occasion, one discovers language so ordinary in these poems that one feels at the threshold between prose and poetry: "I grieved for you then/ as I never had before" ("What Came to Me"); "I am overcome// by ordinary contentment" ("Having It Out with Melancholy"); "How lucky we are/ to be holding hands on a porch/ in the country" ("Song"). I love these lines; but more engaging, to my mind, is the metaphor- and image-rich writing that manifests the idiosyncratic part of Kenyon's vision. In "The Beaver Pool in December," for example, the animals of the title "pass without/ effort . . . moving like thoughts/ in an unconflicted mind"; in "American Triptych" "cousins arrive like themes and variations"; and in "The Three Susans" "a chill rises from the moss/ prompt as a deacon."

Evidence of this sensibility is also found

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the shifts within poems. Sometimes these are shifts of mood, sometimes of perspective: either way they surprise. Consider "The Three Susans." This poem begins with the frost that wreaked havoc on her neighbors' gardens, moves on to the village graveyard, where Kenyon finds stones memorializing the dead, and winds up at Keats's grave in Rome, where "wild cats are stalking the moat."

> Ancient maples mingle over us, leaves
> the colors of pomegranates.
> The days are warm with honey light,
> but the last two nights have finished
> every garden in the village.
>
> The provident have left green tomatoes
> to ripen on newspaper in the darkness of
> sheds.
> The peppers were already in.
> Now there will be no more corn.
>
> I let myself through the wrought-iron gate
> of the graveyard, and—meaning to exclude
> the dog—I close it after me. But he runs
> to the other end, and jumps the stone
> wall overlooking Elbow Pond.
>
> Here Samuel Smith lay down at last
> with his three wives, all named Susan.
> I had to see it for myself. They died
> in their sixties, one outliving him.
> So why do I feel indignant? He suffered.
> Love and the Smiths' peculiar fame
> "to nothingness do sink." And down the
> row
> Sleepers are living up to their name.
>
> The dog cocks his leg on a stone.
> But animals do not mock, and the dead
> may be glad to have life breaking in.
>
> The sun drops low over the pond.
> Long shadows move out from the stones,
> and a chill rises from the moss,
> prompt as a deacon. And at Keats's grave
> in the Protestant cemetery in Rome
> it is already night,
> and wild cats are stalking in the moat.

What begins as a routine reflection on death in her community becomes a journey, not only from the somber to the lighthearted—the jibes about the Sleepers and the dog relieving itself on the stone form a refreshing counterpoint to the theme of death—but from one end of the world to another. The poem shows Kenyon to be interested in recounting more than what is immediately perceptible. It also reveals a poet who is not spellbound by a single, surface emotion.

Wonderful details abound: the Sleepers "living up to their name," but only in death; the provident who save the last of the season's fruit in the face of death and decay; the invocation of two famous literary precursors, Shakespeare (through quotation) and Keats, who have been invited to Kenyon's little graveside gathering along with the less renowned Smiths and Sleepers. If it all weren't so funny—and it is, despite the glum conclusion—one could call "The Three Susans" a democracy of sorrow.

"Man Eating" contains another surprising scenic shift:

> The man at the table across from mine
> is eating yogurt. His eyes, following
> the progress of the spoon, cross briefly
> each time it nears his face. Time,
>
> and the world with all its principalities,
> might come to an end as prophesied
> by the Apostle John, but what about
> this man, so completely present
>
> to the little carton with its cool,
> sweet food, which has caused no animal
> to suffer, and which he is eating
> with a pearl-white plastic spoon.

The followers of William Carlos Williams maintain that poets should render faithfully what they see, and Kenyon certainly lives up to this injunction, at least until the second stanza. At this point we see an explosive shift in mood and setting, underscored partly by the way the poet precedes it with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scene that *is* "perfect Williams." In a 1982 essay on Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney remarks that Larkin's verse "strikes into the realm of pure being" and that some of his poems "have openings at their imaginative center that take the reader through and beyond." Kenyon's language may not be visionary in the way that Heaney suggests Larkin's is, but its effect is similar.

"Insomnia at the Solstice" begins brightly enough, with Kenyon celebrating the wood thrush's song at "the end of the sun's single most/ altruistic day." But as if to pay for it all, in bed that night Kenyon is bedeviled by:

> . . . wordless contemplations
> on love and death, worry about
> money, and the resolve to have the vet
> clean the dog's teeth, though
> they'll have to anesthetize him.
>
> An easy rain begins, drips off
> the edge of the roof, onto the tin
> watering can. A vast irritation rises. . . .
> I turn and turn, try one pillow,
> two, think of people who have no beds.
>
> A car hisses by on wet macadam.
> Then another. The room turns
> gray by insensible degrees. The thrush
> begins again its outpouring of silver
> to rich and poor alike, to the just
> and the unjust.
>
> The dog's wet nose appears
> on the pillow, pressing lightly,
> decorously. He needs to go out.
> All right, cleverhead, let's declare
> a new day.
> Washing up, I say
> to the face in the mirror,
> "You're still here! How you bored me
> all night, and now I'll have
> to entertain you all day. . . ."

Here again Kenyon explores a range of emotions off limits to most confessionalists. This time the humorous touch comes at the end.

In "Pharaoh," an ironic remark at the beginning of the second stanza offsets the impact of devastating news:

> "The future ain't what it used to be,"
> said the sage of the New York Yankees
> as he pounded his mitt, releasing
> the red dust of the infield
> into the harshly illuminated air.
>
> Big hands. Men with big hands
> make things happen. The surgeon,
> when I asked how big your tumor was,
> held forth his substantial fist
> with its globe class ring.

The shift from baseball to tumors certainly qualifies as wrenching, but even more head-turning is the observation that "men with big hands/ make things happen." Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, and such grief-avoiding ironies make Kenyon even less confessional and Williamsonian in spirit. "Pharaoh," not quoted here in its entirety, is one of Kenyon's finest poems.

Also dashing confessional expectations is "Prognosis." Here the menacing title leads to a poem containing no anguished revelations at all. Again, Kenyon's unwillingness to follow confessional orders and relate juicy details is gratifying.

Another aspect of Kenyon's poetry we don't associate with the "confessional" impulse is her reliance on literary images. Sometimes writers are mentioned, as in "Chekhov's Story," "Lines for Akhmatova," and "The Three Susans"; sometimes characters turn up (Madame Bovary in "Thinking of Madame Bovary," *The Cherry Orchard*'s Varya in "Going Away," and Rabbit Angstrom in "Insomnia at the Solstice"). One poem has an epigraph from *The Cherry Orchard*, Shakespeare is quoted in "The Three Susans," and in another poem Kenyon is reading Proust. "Their hunger is Homeric," she writes in "Chekhov's Story," and in "Alone for a Week" a pillow is "plump, cool,/ and allegorical."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sometimes lines of Kenyon's recall other poets' well-known lines. "But sometimes what looks like disaster/ *is* disaster" ("The Pond at Dusk") seems to be a retort to Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." And "Having It Out with Melancholy," in which Kenyon rings off the names of anti-depressants—"Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin,/ Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax,/ Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft"—recalls Donald Hall's far happier "Names of Horses," which ends: "O Roger, Mackerel, Riley, Ned, Nellie, Chester, Lady Ghost." Most "confessional" or nature poets strain to appear as unliterary as possible, but not Kenyon, who in the poem entitled "Who" declares "words" to be her "food."

In his excellent afterword to *Otherwise*, Donald Hall mentions Kenyon's voracious reading and rereading of certain authors, citing in particular Chekhov, Akhmatova, Keats, and Bishop. "Her poetry gathered resonance and beauty as she studied the art of the luminous particular," Hall writes. "'The natural object'—she liked to quote Pound—'is always the adequate symbol.'"

If I had to choose the one writer Kenyon most resembles it would probably be Chekhov, the Chekhov who took the world as his subject but whose seeming bleakness baffled the critics of his day. What Kenyon found appealing in Chekhov, I think, was the modesty of his undertaking, his refusal to search for final meanings, and the tendency to chuckle rather than rail at the world in the face of despair. "Philosophy in Warm Weather"—Kenyon's title of a poem devoid of philosophy—could have been written by Chekhov, if he had been tempted by poetry.

But that's not all Kenyon took from her Russian mentor. She also borrowed his spare style and those "luminous" particulars that seem easy to master, but aren't. For they don't become luminous until they have been transformed by someone with the patience, skill, and vision to make them linger in our mind.

In his *Introduction to American Literature* (1971), Jorge Luis Borges wrote of Crane and Dreiser: "The former imagined reality, the latter impresses us as having studied it." Where between these two extremes does Kenyon fit? She certainly does more than study reality in order to replicate it on the page, as Dreiser and other hard-line realists did; she writes poems that go places she herself sometimes can't predict. This alone would make her closer in spirit to Crane.

Another reason to put her in the company of the imaginers has to do with her reliance on the "luminous particular." For many of Williams's "confessional" progeny—including those who flock to express themselves at open mikes everywhere—the very idea of emphasizing one detail over another, and of making a few "luminous" at the expense of the rest, is too elitist. Unvarnished and undifferentiated details are what Lowell swore by—in the late 1960s he admitted that his current productions were temporary and replaceable—and when details are made luminous, the imagination is at work, a part of the imagination that isn't democratically at everyone's disposal.

When we attempt to define Jane Kenyon's poetic identity in the years to come, we should remember that while she was second to none in her love of the world, she made poems that are not so much reflections of that world as bold and brilliant responses to it. She will be sorely missed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Treasure Trove of Cinematic Achievement

And Now It Can Be Yours . . . .

Hollywood. At once the name conjurs images of Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant, Julia Roberts, Tom Hanks. These are the men and women that we idolize and imitate. Movies and movie stars have been a part of the American dream for one hundred years. *American Cinema: One Hundred Years of Filmmaking* captures the spirit and legend of the movies.

Author Jeanine Basinger treats us to more than an ordinary survey of the Hollywood past and present. Drawing on a wealth of sources, including *exclusive* interviews with scores of actors and filmmakers—148 in all—this massive volume abounds in first-hand accounts and analysis.

"Stunning Photography"

Stunning is the only way to describe the photos, many of which have never been seen before. The list is long and includes:

- ✧ 314 photos, 92 presented in gorgeous color
- ✧ An incredible 73 full-page photos, including 12 exciting 2-page spreads
- ✧ Big 10 x 11 size, over 300 pages

Your typical coffee-table volume? Think again. The text is an archive of information and insight on the phenomenon we call Hollywood. A *small* sampling of what you'll find:

- ✧ The stars: young and old, then and now
- ✧ Film noir: from Bogart to Bacall
- ✧ Color: the early experiments, including a remarkable still from the 1922 film *Toll of the Sea*
- ✧ Romantic screwball comedy: Cary Grant, Jean Arthur, and more
- ✧ Westerns and combat on film: how Hollywood shapes our sense of historical reality
- ✧ Remakes and sequels: the 10 characters most frequently depicted on the screen
- ✧ Changing censorship requirements: the *original* list of "don'ts" and "be carefuls"
- ✧ Hollywood studio system then and now: the Big Five and Little Three ....and the independents
- ✧ The TV age: power shift and restructuring; new competition from Europe
- ✧ The cutting edge of today's Hollywood (and a sneak preview of what's ahead)

Don't pass up this golden opportunity to receive the entire history of American filmmaking for less than the cost of attending a single movie! For reading, for viewing, for display on your coffee table, this volume is indeed different from all others.

How to get this $50 book for only $6.95!

How the Club Works

Every 4 weeks (13 times a year) you get a free copy of the Club bulletin, PREVIEWS, which offers the Featured Selection plus a nice choice of Alternates: books on films, TV, music, occasionally tapes and videocassettes. ★ If you want the Featured Selection, do nothing. It will come automatically. ★ If you don't want the Featured Selection or you do want an Alternate, indicate your wishes on the handy card enclosed and return it by the deadline date. ★ The majority of Club books are offered at 20-30% discounts, plus a charge for shipping and handling. ★ As soon as you buy and pay for 4 books, tapes or videocassettes at regular Club prices, your membership may be ended at any time, either by you or by the Club. ★ If you ever receive a Featured Selection without having had 10 days to decide if you want it, you may return it at Club expense for full credit. ★ For every book, tape or videocassette you buy at regular Club prices, you receive one or more Bonus Book Certificates. These entitle you to buy many Club books at deep discounts, usually 60-80% off. These Bonus Books do not count toward fulfilling your Club obligation but do enable you to buy fine books at giveaway prices. ★ PREVIEWS also includes news about members and their hobbies. You are welcome to send in similar items. The Club will publish any such item it deems suitable, FREE. This is a real CLUB! ★ Good service. Great selection! ★ Only one membership per household.

MOVIE/ENTERTAINMENT BOOK CLUB

33 Oakland Avenue • Harrison, N.Y. 10528

I enclose $6.95. Please accept my membership in the Club and send, postpaid, AMERICAN CINEMA, a $50 value. I agree to buy 4 additional books, tapes or videotapes at regular Club prices over the next 2 years. I also agree to the Club rules spelled out in the coupon.

NC-19

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HOLE in our SOUL

Martha Bayles

"*Hole in Our Soul* is engaging, provocative, always suggestive, sometimes annoying, and often incisive in a language that is free of post-modern jargon and deconstructive cant. . . . Whether you agree or disagree with all her thesis, one is struck by the grace and humanity animating it all. There is much wrong about American popular music but one of the things right about it is Ms. Bayles's book."
—Gerald Early, author of *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture*

Paper $16.95 461 pages

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637

PAPER AND CLAY

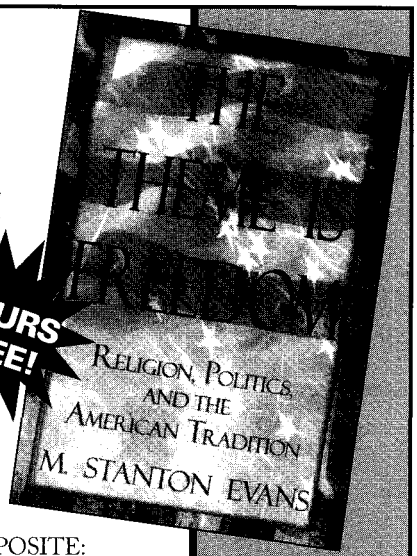
Richard Lethem
Vera Lightstone
William Phipps
Betty Winkler

February 2nd to May 26th

ATELIER A/E ENT
323 WEST 22ND STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011
TELEPHONE: 212.620.8103 FAX: 212.620.8106
HOURS: FRIDAYS, SATURDAYS, AND SUNDAYS 12-6
AND BY APPOINTMENT

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOW, the truth about Christianity's central role in fostering our once-great system of government



YOURS FREE!

TO M. STANTON EVANS,
THE BIG LIBERAL LIE IS THIS:

"Religion and liberty have always been in conflict. Freedom, democracy, and intellectual inquiry flourished in the pagan era, were crushed during the Christian Middle Ages, and revived only when Renaissance humanists threw off the shackles of belief."

BUT THE TRUTH, EVANS PROVES, IS JUST THE OPPOSITE:

It is Christianity—not humanism—from which the Western ideal of liberty derives and why faith and freedom must go together and always have.

Evans also brilliantly addresses these compelling issues:

- ★ What liberals really mean by "freedom" and how that differs from the entire Western tradition
- ★ The real "wall of separation" erected by the First Amendment—and torn down by the liberals
- ★ The key contributions to our form of government—downplayed in standard histories—by the early Christian settlers
- ★ Why liberty as we conceive it existed nowhere in the ancient world—not even "democratic Athens"
- ★ How Christianity humanized or abolished the brutal aspects of ancient Greek and Roman culture
- ★ Why the Declaration of Independence and the French "Declaration of the Rights of Man" are not the ideological "twins" of liberal mythology, but radically opposed

"Sure to become a classic restatement of a tradition of liberty now all but extinct in this country, but without which the American public could not have existed. If that tradition survives, it will be in large part because in its last days it could still generate defenses as vigorous as the one Mr. Evans has written."
—Samuel Francis, *Washington Times*

Author Evans shows that the ideas of limited government, the free market, and private property, actually derived from Christian principles, and are unthinkable without them. The proof is as plain as recent history: government hostility to individual liberty has grown lock-step with its hostility to religion. Evans takes you deep into church history and the development of free economics, linking them brilliantly.

HOW TO GET THIS $24.95 BOOK ABSOLUTELY FREE!

BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP AND HOW THE CLUB WORKS

INSTANT SAVINGS! Join today and get this book free, you pay only shipping and handling. Then take up to two years to buy four more books at regular low Club prices (20-50% below retail!). After you have paid for your four books, your membership can be ended by you or the Club. Plus you will also get opportunities to buy from our list of Superbargain books that the Club regularly offers. These books are offered at 70-95% discounts!! (Sorry, Superbargain books don't count toward your book commitment.)

FREE BULLETIN! At least 13 times a year you will receive the Club Bulletin packed with the kind of books you will want to read and own. Each bulletin will describe a Featured Selection chosen just for our members. Also included are a number of alternate selections about politics, religion, home schooling and other areas of interest to conservatives.

SHOP AT HOME CONVENIENCE! When you receive your Bulletin you will have the chance to examine the many books of interest and read reviews for each. If you want to receive the Featured Selection, do nothing and it will be sent to you. If you don't want the Featured Selection or you would like an alternate selection, simply indicate your wishes on the handy card enclosed with your Bulletin and return it before the deadline date. CBC is an easy way to build your conservative library from the comfort of your own home.

100% SATISFACTION GUARANTEED! If you are not completely satisfied with any book, return it and receive a complete refund. Plus, you will always have at least ten days to make your decision to receive the Featured Selection. If you ever have less than ten days, you simply return the book at Club expense for a full refund. One membership per household please.

CONSERVATIVE BOOK CLUB

33 Oakland Avenue • Harrison, N.Y. 10528

❑ **YES!** Please enroll me in the Conservative Book Club according to the membership plan outlined in this ad. Send me *The Theme Is Freedom* for free, I pay only shipping and handling. I agree to buy just four more books at regular low Club prices within the next two years.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Although I am free to choose from any category, I'm most interested in:

❑ Politics/Government ❑ Religion
❑ Children/Home Schooling ❑ Business/Economics

NEW C-13

EAGLE BOOK CLUBS, INC.
An Eagle Publishing Company

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The CHESTERTON REVIEW

Vincent McNabb
Special Double Issue

Articles include:

- "The Relevance of Father Vincent McNabb" *by Dermot Quinn, Malcolm McMahon, O.P., Paul Likoudis, Thomas Storck, and John Mueller*
- "Father McNabb: Dominican" *–Bede Bailey, O.P.*
- "Memories of Father McNabb" *–Conrad Pepler, O.P.*
- "The Irishness of Vincent McNabb" *–Owen D. Edwards*
- "Primary Things: Land, Work, and Sign" *–Adrian Cunningham*
- "The Disuse of Reason" *–David Albert Jones, O.P.*
- "The Catholic Land Movement in England" *–Bryan Keating*
- "Father Vincent McNabb, A Dangerous Crank?" *–Hugh Walters*
- "Father McNabb and Rome" *–Bede Bailey, O.P.*

This jumbo issue contains an abundance of material from the Dominican archives as well as reviews of current books and a vast "News-and-Comments" section which provides commentaries about Father McNabb and his world. RICHLY ILLUSTRATED, the issue forms a volume in its own right (300 pages), and is likely to become a collector's item.

Please enter my membership to the *Chesterton Review* for one/two years at $37.00 per year. (Outside Canada payable in U. S. dollars.) ❑ One year ($37.00) ❑ Two Years ($70.00) ❑ Single McNabb issue ($40.00)

Name .....

Address ..... City ..... Province/State .....

Postal/Zip Code .....

Charge to VISA # ..... Mastercard ..... Expiry Date .....

Make cheque payable to: CHESTERTON REVIEW, 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N OW6, Canada
or for faster service for your VISA order call: (U.S.A.) PHONE or FAX 1-800-260-9363.
Elsewhere, PHONE: 1-306-966-8917 or FAX: 1-306-966-8917

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Sound of Great Ideas!®

The actual voices of . . . W. H. Auden • Robert Frost • Edwin Newman • Gilbert Highet • Edward DeBono • William Saroyan • Robert Lowell • Bruno Bettelheim • Sir Edmund Hillary • Stephen Spender . . . and many others.

HEAR what these provocative thinkers have to say about self-discovery, the quality of life, the nature of the creative mind, changes taking place in the world today, and what you can do to bring about change.

There's a difference in **hearing** new ideas rather than simply reading them. The author is able to provide his or her unique emphasis in ways impossible to accomplish in print. Pauses and tonal changes become meaning and create insights and increased understanding.

And audio cassettes provide a medium for learning experiences that can be shared simultaneously with someone else, thus encouraging immediate discussion and interaction.

Today's audio cassettes capture the inflections, nuances and flavor of the original speaker, and let you hear them over and over while driving, cooking, jogging, etc. Since some of these voices will never be heard again, here's your opportunity to savor the sound of great ideas that have shaped today's world, and to own these cassettes for your library.

From the more than 4,000 titles in the prestigious Audio-Forum Library, we have selected 26 extraordinary recordings. Imagine hearing these dynamic personalities in the intimacy of your own home! The regular price per cassette is $13.95. **But now for the special price of $9.95 you have the opportunity to listen whenever and wherever you choose. PLUS for every 3 cassettes you buy, we'll send you a cassette of your choice FREE!**

"The Sound of Great Ideas" from
Audio-Forum,
Suite P640, 96 Broad St.,
Guilford, CT 06437. (203) 453;9794

The 26 audio cassettes listed here were chosen by a panel of experts who were asked to select only tapes which would be timely and relevant. Each has passed the simple test of genuine interest: "Would you want to listen to this tape again?"

HEAR these famous speakers:

- **A** **W. H. Auden:** *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (59 min.)
- **B** **Richard Avedon:** *An Interview with Richard Avedon* (60 min.)
- **C** **Bruno Bettelheim:** *Man's Identity in a Mass Society* (48 min.)
- **D** **Otto Bettman:** *The Good Old Days: They Were Terrible* (55 min.)
- **E** **Nathaniel Branden:** *Dealing With the Gifted Child* (48 min.)
- **F** **Carlos Castaneda:** *Don Juan: The Sorcerer* (38 min.)
- **G** **Alistair Cooke:** *America: An Outside View* (55 min.)
- **H** **Edward De Bono:** *How to Change Ideas* (55 min.)
- **I** **Erich Fromm:** *To Have or to Be: The Nature of the Psyche* (56 min.)
- **J** **Robert Frost:** *An Evening with Robert Frost* (55 min.)
- **K** **Buckminster Fuller:** *Twentieth-Century Renaissance* (55 min.)
- **L** **Thor Heyerdahl:** *Waters of the World* (58 min.)
- **M** **Gilbert Highet:** *The Art of Invective/A Bouquet of Poison Ivy* (30 min.)
- **N** **Sir Edmund Hillary:** *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* (55 min.)
- **O** **G. Wilson Knight:** *Shakespeare and the English Language* (30 min.)
- **P** **Robert Lowell:** *Reads and Discusses His Poetry* (28 min.)
- **Q** **Joseph Mazzeo:** *The Idea of Progress: Science and Poetry* (46 min.)
- **R** **Ashley Montagu:** *The Nature of Human Nature* (48 mn.)
- **S** **Edwin Newman:** *Decline and Fall of American Language* (55 min.)
- **T** **J. Robert Oppenheimer:** *Relevance of Literature to Science* (19 min.)
- **U** **Asimov & Pohl:** *Science Fiction: The Early Days* (55 min.)
- **V** **William Saroyan:** *The Real World of the Writer* (48 min.)
- **W** **Upton Sinclair:** *A Pen to Change America* (40 min.)
- **X** **Stephen Spender:** *T.S. Eliot and George Orwell* (41 min.)
- **Y** **Paul Tillich/Adela Rogers St. Johns:** *An Interview* (60 min.)
- **Z** **Eudora Welty:** *Learning to Write Fiction* (53 min.)

☐**YES!** Please send me the following selections at $9.95 each plus $1.00 shipping charge for the first tape, and .50 for each additional tape. (For shipments to CT, please add sales tax.)

I understand that for every 3 cassettes I order, I will get one FREE!

My selections: ◯◯◯◯◯◯

My free selection: ◯ ◯

NAME (print) _____

ADDRESS, APT# _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

SIGNATURE _____

Total amount of order: $_____
(Including tax and shipping)

☐ Check or money order enclosed
☐ VISA ☐ American Express
☐ MasterCard ☐ Diners Club
☐ Discover Card

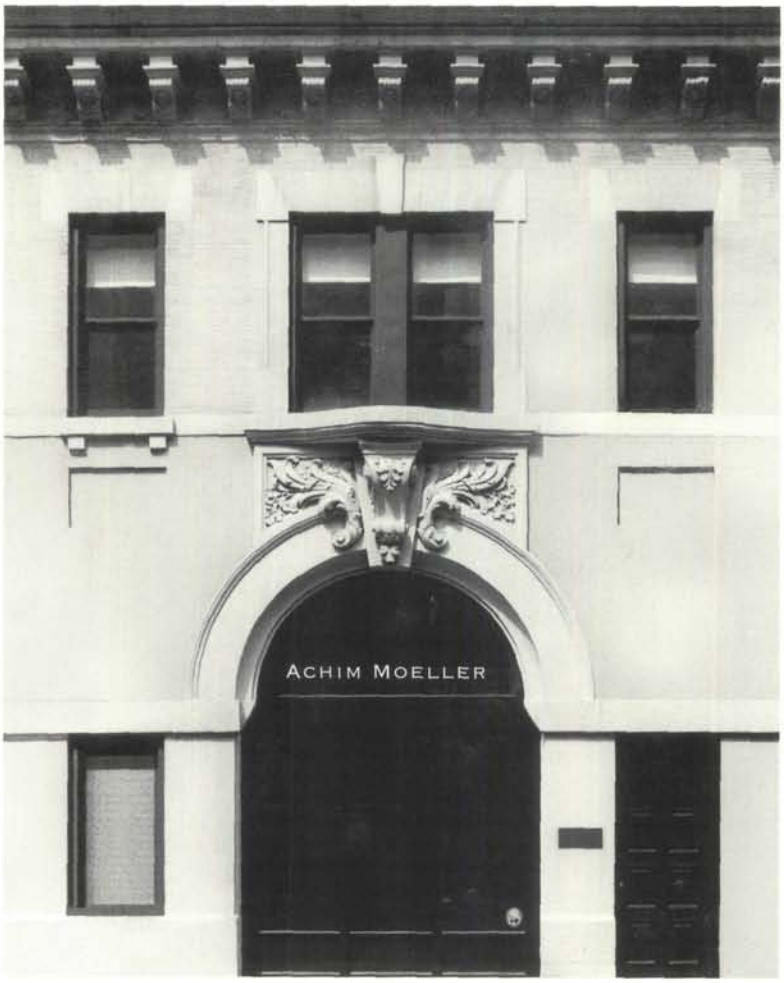
Expiration Date:_____

Card #_____

Signature_____

Mail To: **AUDIO-FORUM®**
Suite P640, 96 Broad St.,
Guilford, CT 06437. (203) 453;9794

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



New address as of 1st June, 1996

ACHIM MOELLER FINE ART

167 EAST 73RD STREET NEW YORK NY 10021 TELEPHONE 212 988 8483 FAX 212 988 8480

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED